

APPARATUS POETICA: THE QUESTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN MID-TWENTIETH-  
CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

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## APPARATUS POETICA: THE QUESTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

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“Apparatus Poetica” considers how four poets in the late modernist tradition reconceive the potentials of poetic language in order to address the question of advanced technology. Outlining challenges posed to language by communications industries, information theory, computation, and the threat of nuclear war, I show how four poets—James Merrill, Muriel Rukeyser, H.D., and Jack Spicer—explore affinities and crucial distinctions between poetry and technology. Through their experiments in what I call “apparatus poetics,” these poets denaturalize culturally embedded assumptions surrounding technology’s “neutrality” and poetry’s expressive “purity.” They do so through procedural innovations in the genre of the poetic epic, that form not coincidentally deemed by modernist anthropologists as the earliest human memory-technology. I begin with a discussion of how the montage apparatus of testimonial poetry in Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* works to indict industrial capital’s technological tactics of historical effacement. I next discuss how Jack Spicer, working as a structural linguist in the age of IBM, uses a late modernist method, the “serial lyric,” to set up a confrontation between poetic consciousness and language. Spicer casts the old predicament of thought’s alienation from language in a new light defined by contemporary forms of technological emergence (especially computational intelligence). In the historical moment where databases begin to supplant cultural archives, H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* meditates on translation and disintegration at the virtual horizon of memory and myth. I attend to how H.D.’s late-career epic revives an earlier, modernist moment of inquiry into the “machine mind” and “mnemic technology” through her collaboration with Sigmund Freud. I conclude with an exploration of how James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover* engages language’s aleatory powers to situate inspiration’s accidents amid uncertain historical and technological horizons. This dissertation explores how these late modernists use language’s *technē* to rethink mid-century historical forces catalyzed by technology. Insisting on language’s poetic ability to exceed instrumentalized capture, these poets share an interest in theorizing new ethical relations for reconnecting “subject” and “process” in an age when forms of collectivity are undergoing rapid technological redefinition.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Avery Slater was an Andrew W. Mellon graduate fellow at the Society for the Humanities during the focal research theme “Occupation” (2013-2014), and she is the recipient of a two year postdoctoral fellowship in English at the University of Texas at Austin (2014-2016). She holds an M.F.A. in poetry (2006, University of Washington) and an M.Phil. in Culture and Criticism (2007, University of Cambridge) where she specialized in the History and Philosophy of Science. Her work in the fields of comparative poetics, technology studies, and film theory has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Cultural Critique*, *American Literature*, and *Thinking Verse*. Her poetry has been published most recently in *Raritan*, *Poetry London*, *Literary Imagination*, *Parnassus*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Crazyhorse*, among other journals. She is the 2014 recipient of Cornell’s Corson Browning poetry prize, and she recently finished a translation of Paul Celan’s 1963 poetry collection *The No-One’s Rose*. Currently completing a book manuscript based on her dissertation, she is also beginning work on a second project in comparative ecopoetics and translation theory.

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## INTRODUCTION

As the aesthetic legacy of modernism entered the period of Cold War militarization, late-modernist poetics found itself often demarcated by factions, schools, and competing ideologies. Yet while postwar poetics offer critiques of subjectively and nationally unified perspectives alike, of traditional language as well as the language of the avant-garde, in hindsight it may seem strange that no corresponding poetic faction arose to address one of this period's most pervasively destabilizing coefficients: the problem of advanced technology.

Exponential growth in computation, information, and communication technologies precariously set the terms of "progress" for these decades while global politics pursued security through perpetually escalating technologies of war. This historical moment raised, for its poets, an urgent question: how to conjoin or elaborate poetic theories of language together with the nascent mathematics of communication, computation, cryptography, and, in a much larger sense, the technological threat of nuclear war? In what follows, I will discuss the work of four late modernist poets whom I see as poetically allied with respect to these unique and indeed unprecedented questions of technological modernity. Experimenting with process-based variations on the tradition of the modernist epic, poised between poetic inspiration and technological product, the epics of James Merrill, H.D., Jack Spicer, and Muriel Rukeyser theorize and practice what I call "apparatus poetics." The value of these poets' contributions lies in their innovations at the level of practice: they foster an orientation to language that accentuates poetry's inherent relation to *technē*. At the same time, their poetics opposes technocratic regimes that would instrumentalize language as mere technology.

Highlighting historic affinities between poetry and technology, as well as their crucial

differences. I argue that within these differences resides language's philosophical, political meaning as an open, intersubjective system. Hoping to recover through language an ethics for technology, these poets commit their work not to reversing technology's historical development but rather to questioning its cultural hegemony. Resisting language's capture in logics of calculability, these experiments with apparatus poetics help manifest and think through the cultural history of issues raised by technological advance. Amid global convergences of threat, innovation, and ever more totalizing aspirations toward technological control, Spicer, H.D., Rukeyser, and Merrill re-theorize the precarious human subject in relation to uncertain process, orienting their poetics to address language's new permutations within technological modernity.

Their understanding of poetry as a procedural yet non-instrumental practice makes their experiments acutely relevant to an age in which it has become paramount to reassess the significance of what lies beyond calculation. Framed by the contemporary annexation of language's powers for technological ends, these poets return us to the ethical import of language's unassimilated and ungovernable dimensions. This work explores the American poetic response to the question of technology in the second half of the twentieth century through an uncommon constellation of poets, each selected for their commitment to a common question: how have transformations in technology in the mid-twentieth century changed the way in which the practice of poetry might conceive of its role as politically, socially, aesthetically, and philosophically generative?

Apparatus poetics, as I define this terrain, is not organized primarily by explicit nor by thematic representations of technology within poetry. Neither does this theory seek to address myriad forms of experimentation with language in twentieth century poetry that might be said to literally technologize poetic production. Instead, this theory of apparatus poetics posits a



preexisting ground that is common to poetry and technology alike. The artistic innovations of the above poets, I argue, are characterized by their sharing this tenet, a tenet that incites furthermore an ethico-political awareness which would implicate poetry in technology's risks. Apparatus poetics theorize a horizon for poetry at which the technological within the poetic, and the poetic within the technological, is revealed.

"The more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes," said Martin Heidegger in his 1955 lecture "Concerning the question of technology." In this lecture, Heidegger enjoins humanity to look not away from but *into* the question of technology—despite the mounting evidence of its dangers and its risks—so that in doing so, humanity might find its own essence and existence inextricably implicated within its own creations. Heidegger believes that only by considering human economies of ordered accumulation and restrictive "enframings" of the world, which technology has thus far facilitated, will we begin at last to address the contemporary question of technology from the right perspective: that is, if we hope to find redemption we must journey *into* technology and not away from it. Along this path, which my research also seeks to follow, the signs of risk for humanity which one encounters at the threshold of technology are, paradoxically, those same signs of its hope and its potential.

My dissertation will investigate the evolution of certain strands of twentieth century American poetics in tandem with the century's developing technologies, attending to how this history of unprecedented innovation and apocalyptic implication came to be inscribed in their poetic work as among the most urgent of questions. The four poets whom I consider—none of whom are generally associated with the others in literary scholarship—share what I argue is, poetically and philosophically, a mutual strategy: to pursue how the trope or the *turn* of

technology questions not only the *grounding* of technology but also the basis of poetry, in its historical and cultural sense. Thus these four poets develop a rejoinder to and a rejoining of the alleged disjuncture between poetry and technology.<sup>1</sup> Given their unique historical context, during which the specter of apocalyptic technology looms large in popular imagination, this also means that these poets insist that poetry must, will, and does share in technology's dangers.

The period I examine lies between the rise of Fascist militarization (circa 1933) and the end of the Cold War in 1989. Acute cultural awareness of the endangerment posed by technology led many poetic movements to adopt stances antagonistic to technology. Projectivist poetry fetishized the embodied "voice," while Confessional poets reaffirmed human subjectivity as the perennial hub of meaning. Often falling foul of these movements' hegemonic ascent, Spicer, H.D., Rukeyser, and Merrill focused not on the antagonism between technology and poetry, but rather on their uncanny *alliances*. It is this strand of the mutual indebtedness between the histories and the futures of poetry and technology that I seek to foreground. By historic precedent, poetry and technology have been perceived—and have often perceived themselves—as dissociated from each other, separated by the distance between romantic universalism and pragmatic utilitarianism, and regarding each other with indifference if not downright hostility. The premise of this analysis and research, however, takes seriously the idea that not only can poetry productively take up the forms of technology, *poetry is a form of technology* in the truest

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<sup>1</sup> John Gery has argued for the existence of a "unique and intricate link" between nuclear weapons and poetry "that has existed from the time the first weaponry was conceived" (3), making poetry's voice a crucial participant in our "discourse of survival" (4). Gery attributes this link to poetry's powers of "speculative thinking" that involve "using the imagination in ways usually associated not with empirical or technological research but with... alternative endeavors, such as scientific hypothesizing, game-playing, story-telling, philosophical inquiry, and... poetry" (8). While my dissertation proceeds from a similar theoretical set of presumptions, my difference from Gery lies in my disagreement with his distinction between science and technology. I incline more to the side of epistemological constructivism when it comes to science after empiricism (16<sup>th</sup> century to the present). That is, technology cannot be separated from the theoretical pursuits of science after Bacon, primarily because an experimental science is a science that relies on the accompanying measurement and perceptual extension of its instruments, the apparatus of experiment. As Bachelard puts it, even after the discovery of the principle of relativity, "Instruments are theories materialized."

sense. What draws these four poets into the same orbit is the ways in which their poetics develop the question of technology as a risk and as a challenge rather than as an unquestioned asset or novelty.

The questions that technology begins to pose for humanity in the twentieth century had already been explicitly thematized in particular trajectories of European poetry: from the technological triumphalism of the various international Futurist movements, through the interwar split between Surrealism—whose celebratory use of automatic writing sought within the human unconscious a liberatory technology *incarnate*—while, conversely, Dada’s cynical nonsense-poetry offered its pessimistic resistance and anarchic noncooperation to the world’s increasingly violent technocratization. Once the global collapse of the market made clear that industrial and technological production under capitalism would be neither sufficient nor capable of materializing a viable form of social wealth, and once a second war of economic and ideological reparations on a global scale was imminent, the stage was set for a poetics of crisis haunted by a new and more ambivalent set of questions for technology.

In the twentieth century, more than at any other time, the risks of technology come to be seen as intimately tied to the future of humanity, and planetary life more generally. Heidegger’s lecture concerning technology appears in the context of the first detonation of the Soviet reply to the United States’ thermonuclear escalation, an age in which the instantaneous destruction of entire civilizations and entire ecologies would come to haunt a newly international political imagination. It is my contention that after World War II, the Holocaust, and the dawn of the nuclear age had left indelible marks on global consciousness, American poetry began to develop markedly diverse responses to these histories and their predicted futures.

It would be impossible for these poets to avoid the shadow thrown across the second half

of the century by an increasingly globalized warfare attuned to schematics of neo-imperialism, all while newly generated “military industrial complexes” began to proliferate weapons of mass destruction, for a politics of negative spectacle: weapons whose deployment would have had consequences far beyond any nation-state’s viable, political uses. In other words, these poets are writing in a moment when technology has completely outstripped ideology, means diverging uncontrollably from ends. In a Cold War politics of escalating détente, when technology conceives of weapons that put all social imaginaries, all humanity, and all planetary ecology at risk, the political “use” of technology comes to be, paradoxically, the symbol of its use withheld. Berger defines apocalyptic knowledge: “The apocalyptic mode of knowing,” as Charles Berger has defined it, in relation to Wallace Stevens, “involves the breaking apart of all merely temporal truths, including the planet of which we are part” (87).<sup>2</sup> As technology approaches this paradox of auto-cognizant auto-apocalypse, the apparatus poetics these four poets construct seek to bring poetry itself to cognizance of this threshold.

Writing amid the unprecedented mid-century technological developments, these poets inhabited a newly apocalyptic consciousness in order to adapt poetic responses which could account for and operate within this changed landscape of danger. Where the Romantics (and even the modernists) might be said to have been engaging with the degenerative potentials of technology, these four “after-modernist” poets must squarely engage technology’s newly threatening powers of *origination*: powers that had come to transcend the very politics they were designed to sustain. In their common refusal to sidestep the question of technology, these poets imagine a shared future for poetry and technology. Their theory of apparatus poetics develops

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<sup>2</sup> In an opposing reading of Wallace Stevens poetry with respect to (technologically determined) sociopolitical modernity, Helen Vendler writes (in 1969, *On Extended Wings*) that “Stevens became convinced that poetry even in world wars, need not be topical or social” and that “the reality of poetry was not given to it by the newspapers, but by the self” (cited Boyer, 247).

not divorced from but wedded to its history. I will argue that the literary and social contribution of these four poets lies in their use of apparatus poetics to re-historicize and re-politicize the *future* of technology, a future in which poetry is included as a kindred form.

These poets question the myth in which poetic inspiration is tantamount to cultural origination. I argue that they envision this process somewhat in reverse, so that poetry originates primarily in response to how certain textual and cultural histories *dissipate*. Whether this dissipation proceeds through violent technologies of silencing and colonial or capitalist annexation (with which Rukeyser and H.D. are particularly concerned) or through an amnesiac utopianism (such as Merrill and Spicer seek to disrupt), these four poets stage a conflict with history, using the devices of poetry with a renewed sense of language's technological nature. From the theory and practice of "apparatus-poetics" that I develop using these four poets' work, I show how poetry and technology must be re-thought as occupying the *same* position with respect to humanity at risk. This stance would be opposed to the more conventional notion that poetry might, from some disciplinary remove, comment on or inveigh against the supposedly inherent evils of technology.

These four poets concomitantly destabilize and rework the putative isomorphism asserted between sociopolitical agency and personhood conceptions of poetic (and Human) "voice" have traditionally figured. I explore how these poets reveal traditionally poetic problematics—from the lyric "I" to problems of genre, address, tropes, and inspiration—as being problems that belong not only to poetry but also to the realm of technology. As a result, these four poets adopt and adapt a radically different relation to the now intertwined questions of technology and inspiration. Whether Spicer's poetics "of the outside," Merrill's synthesis of séance and machine-mind "driven by words to mine meaning," Rukeyser's documentarian-technological

stand-point of the “camera eye,” or H.D.’s mnemonic apparatus of epic translation whose protagonist alternatively “speaks by rote” while attempting to “remind us of the unrecorded,” their four, respective practices draw on yet transcend other, less “mediated” modes of oracular poetics. The distinction lies in the *evaluation* of the outside: where oracular poetics treat the Outside as undisputed, unmediated verity which (human) resistance can only dilute, these four poets enact a negative dialectical relation to the angel of technology. Such a conflict, which puts the relation between the technological, the human, and the Outside *at risk* in pursuit of a new synthesis for human accountability, differentiates these apparatus poetics from oracular poetics. Apparatus poetics take seriously the notion of the poetic “device”—while never losing sight of what the device might be devising. Apparatus poetics seek their survival at the heart of contrivance.

Through their poetic questioning of technology, these poets develop an imperiling or endangerment of the subject through precisely that medium historically presumed to ennoble, to liberate, or to contain the utopian visions of the subject. If technological *poiēsis* has come to mean the art of making empirically present, it also came to construct an antithesis to aesthetic *poiēsis* on the one hand (which retained a Platonic theory of presence in which matter is subordinated to form, to idea, and in other words to “aesthetic beauty” lying within *and* beyond the work). Lyrical *poiēsis*, more specifically, and certainly beginning with Romanticism, came to signify the quest and the riddle of an illusory making-present of that which is constitutively or fundamentally absent. Modernist, Futurist, and Surrealist poetry was to experiment with this present/absent aporia bound up with the historical permutations of lyrical poesis as they found it, towards an at times quasi-empirical making-present of modern experience: using techniques “translated” from contemporaneous technologies—the tram-ride, the camera-eye, the X-Ray, the

telephone, the documentary montage.

The four poets I investigate are late modernist, as I define them, in that they are not located *after* modernism so much as *in the wake of* modernism, a heritage and a vestigial set of aesthetic and historical commitments that distinguish them from the postmodern. These poets remain accountable to modernism's questions and engagements with technology, while at the same time seeking to revise this earlier approach. These poets' late modernism is that which in their work engages with an awareness that their location within technological modernity and the nuclear era is one that not even the end of the Cold War can terminate (as opposed to a ludic or nihilistic postmodern approach to this global condition).<sup>3</sup> The midcentury period, from this technologically oriented perspective, emerges as an age without foreseeable end other than its own Ultimate end. Here, technology has come to pose not so much a civilizational threat (as it did for certain strands of Romanticism and for High Modernism) so much as a threat to all creaturely life: that is, technology in this period creates a new framework of inclusion that encompasses the planet. While Heidegger's 1938 "Age of the World Picture" charts the terrifying ramifications of this new framework of inclusion under the heading of rationality and instrumentalization, technology in this period (particularly following the horrors of the second World War) also require a politics and an aesthetics that can engage with a new level of unintelligibility and unthinkability. Here, technology's lauded ability, in a Heideggerean sense, to make-*present* (or to hold-in-reserve) the fact of know-how, paradoxically comes to produce a

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<sup>3</sup> This late-modernist awareness of the (threatened) end contrasts with the paranoid or even schizoid consciousness that defines the postmodern (fictional) response: as Daniel Cordle puts it, "The perpetual deferral of the nuclear outcome, and the concomitant sense of an alternative reality that is poised behind the everyday, waiting to assert itself, cause problems for realist narratives wedded to a teleological structure" and leads to the wildly nonlinear, anti-closure style of postmodernism (2006: 75). Here, "the overwhelming sense of paranoia... along with the frequent deferral of closure and a concentration on the fraught relations between language and reality," create a stylistic disconnect between content and cognition that defines postmodernism and that, as I would add, also defines postmodernism's *difference* from late modernism, which pursues these same historical realities with greater ethical and intersubjective lucidity (Cordle 2006: 63).

simultaneously total and annihilating reversal: an all-encompassing ability to render its creators catastrophically absent.<sup>4</sup>

Because readings of these poets have not yet undertaken sustained analysis of their respective apparatuses and technologies, scholarship has yet to give a coherent picture of what these (apparatus) poetics undertake by engaging at the procedural as well as the philosophical and thematic level with the question of technology. Here I agree with the general line of analysis taken by John Gery who believes “the unique contribution poetry makes to resisting as well as engaging nuclearism is found in its speculative use of language and form more than in its explicit subject matter” (12).<sup>5</sup> My theory of apparatus poetics and my reading of these poets in tandem proposes to fill this critical gap. Disciplinary penchants for tracking the organization of literary landscapes through maps preconstituted by historical artistic factions and elective affiliations between artists themselves have yielded insightful studies of the socio-political dimensions to coterie and school-based poetics during the Cold War, as well as providing illumination of individual authors through this same biographical-historical lens. And yet, it is this methodological boundary—one that would focus on the biographical facts of association or socially-determined identity rather than constellations designed by philosophical, theoretical affinities to a contemporary *question*—that has made a grouping such as these four poets represent into an unlikely endeavor.

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<sup>4</sup> On the American literary response to nuclear war in the genre of fiction, Daniel Grausam’s *On Endings* (2011) has puts the problem in a similar way, saying that “any fiction that tries to think seriously about the possibility of narrative in the thermonuclear age must be a form of metanarrative that reflects on the very possibility of narrating an event that would leave no narrator” (16). William J. Scheick has similarly observed that “in a world which is like an open-ended dream for authors of post-nuclear holocaust fiction, the nuclear referent is a subjective dream and at the same time something extrinsic to us, something utterly real in its dispositional potentiality to kill the dreamer. The only chance the dreamer (humanity) has for survival in the nuclear age lies... in his or her ability to dream into “external” existence a “fantastical reality” of alternative potentialities” (80).

<sup>5</sup> Gery pursues, however, a different answer to this question of practice than the one I intend. Gery reads his poets of the nuclear age (including Merrill) for their “reconstructive function of portraying ‘ways of nothingness’ by which ...we can carry on a meaningful existence” (11).



Although these poets share a historical period, broadly defined, none of them are associated with the same poetic movement, style, or social-political scene. Merrill's wry aestheticism seems antithetical to H.D.'s feminist mysticism, and Rukeyser's documentary lyricism appears far removed from Spicer's poetics of "extraterrestrial" dictation and renegade Dada. Thus, although (for example) both Spicer and Merrill are homosexual poets writing during overlapping periods, existing work in queer studies has not yet brought these two poets together, presumably because of the difference in their style. While Rukeyser and H.D. may appear together in literary scholarship that focuses on their feminism or their queer sexuality, other aspects of similarity in their poetics have been ignored: for example, their mutual philosophical interrogation of the question of the archive in the age of information technology (for H.D.) and information technology's prehistory, in the bureaucratization of the (bio)political sphere.

These poets are each positioned in very different ways with respect to literary culture, yet the question that unites them lies in their experimentation with technology as that which is situated at the very heart of poetry. For these poets, technology and its risks are not only a contemporary topic for poetry, they are in fact its historically grounding yet previously occluded condition of being. Rather than employing technology as though it were content useful for but ultimately external to poetry—a means of thematic supplementation or of generative formal constraint—these four poets seek not simply to produce poetry *through* technology; instead, they practice poetry *as a mode of technology*. This practice, which I call apparatus poetics, makes itself accountable to the risk of locating humanity inextricably within the framework of humanity's technology, showing poetry to be one among many versions of *technē* by and through which humanity seeks to define itself.

These poets stand out among their contemporaries for the ways in which they foreground

how lyric technologies share equally in the risk, the threat, and dangerous redemption of technology looming so large above their historical context. These concerns fit into a larger context of American literary preoccupations in the and poetic scene during this period of technological emergence. From his introduction to the 1970 anthology, *Forty Poems Touching on Recent American History*, Robert Bly explains that “poets in the Fifties felt that in not writing anything political, they were doing something meritorious” (10). Tellingly, this anthology contains only one poem devoted to the threat of nuclear war (William Stafford’s 1960 “At the Bomb Testing Site”) and another poem touching on total war by Robinson Jeffers (“Rearmament” from 1935). Poetry critic and anthologist Donald Hall comments in an essay published in 1959, “I feel that I see a pattern among us of provinciality and evasion, which results in a reliance on the domestic at the expense of the historical”(cited in Brunner, 185), and in 1963, in an essay entitled “Poetry without Prophecy,” Hayden Carruth wonders why it is so few poets are meditating deeply on the existence of nuclear threat; perhaps it is that they are victims of the widespread cultural “massive neurosis—terror, repression, spasmodic hysteria” he speculates (34). Postwar poet Kenneth Rexroth, guru of the radical poetry scene during the San Francisco Renaissance, observes that “the practice of literature today is the practice of acquiescence” (cited in Kazin 1962: 484). Commenting on this attitude within the disengaged landscape of American postwar poetics, cultural critic Alfred Kazin quipped: “The Russians speak of many disaffected and silent people in their country as ‘internal émigrés’; increasingly it has become natural for many American writers and scholars and intellectuals to think of themselves as ‘internal émigrés’” (450-51). It seems that the disengagement, then, of postwar poetry was related to a nationally pervading and implicit injunction to silence (or, in the case of loyalty oaths and McCarthyism, explicit).

Paul Boyer, considering the relative silence of postwar authors concerning the question of nuclear technology, has given perhaps the most optimistic reading, conjecturing that “Silence may have signaled not a failure of imagination, but intensity of imagination—not wanting to assimilate the ‘monstrous novelty’ too soon” (250).<sup>6</sup> As Ed Brunner, in his book *Cold War Poetics* notes, the most important anthology of poetry written in relation to nuclear technology, John Bradley’s 1995 *Atomic Ghost*, primarily contains poems that were written after 1985. Yet if this silence originated in tactfulness, it seems to have persisted into habit and then into historical gap: consequently, only a few critical monographs have been undertaken since the invention of the bomb that dedicate themselves entirely to the question of Cold War or nuclear-oriented poetics (Brunner 2001; Comens 1995; Gery 1996). Instead, owing to the predominance of interest in technological apocalypse in genres *other* than poetry, most of the scholarship on American literary responses to nuclear peril in this period focus on fiction and popular cultural representations such as film.<sup>7</sup>

Merrill, Rukeyser, Spicer, and H.D. pose this problem of technology as the framework for poetry’s questions in order to insist on the mutual entanglements of fates: between humanity and its technologies, humanity and its poetics. Which is also to say: the widening gap between classical notions of inspiration and techno-industrial powers of production and origination, in the service of human civilization. Even between the time of the Romantics and the acme of literary Modernism, the concept of poetic inspiration had shifted its locus considerably. Moving from the poet as representing an expressive consciousness in communion with natural and classical worlds while situated squarely within a landscape of the given and the immanent, the status of poetic

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of the skewed and largely absent literary response in the years immediately following the bomb’s first detonations, see esp. Boyer’s chapter “Words Fail” (243-56).

<sup>7</sup> Bartter 1988; Booker 2001; Boyer 1985; Brians 1987 (a complete annotated bibliography of fiction on atomic warfare, including introductory essays); Cordle 2006, 2008; Dowling 1987; Mannix 1992; Stone 1994. Edited volumes primarily devoted to fiction: Anisfield 1991; Hammond 2012.

origination had shifted by the time of the Modernists to preoccupy and present a besieged yet organizing consciousness haunted by the past which a wildly unprecedented contemporaneity vies to supersede. This poetic landscape is suffused with shock and disenchantment equal only to its horizons of (re)invigorating futurity. The automatic writing of the Surrealists, in the years between the wars, brokered a compromise with these disconcerting questions of Modernism by turning back to the human psyche, and the newly “discovered” unconscious, as a source of pure expression freed from conventionality and repression. Surrealism shares a commonality with other, more mystical practices of poetic inspiration that precede and follow its moment, in its striving for—to greater or lesser degree—a lack of mediation between poet thought and poetic expression. Whether through an orphic dream-work in pursuit of original psychic structures, or through spirit-dictation by an entranced medium, or through hallucinogenic revelations, poetic documents under formation in the Surrealist and the mystical traditions alike are considered at their most authentic when their spontaneity is least in question.

In connection to the question of poetic inspiration, the aura of the lyrical voice was to attain a considerable postwar legacy perpetuated by everything from New Criticism, to Projectivist poetry’s revival of the Whitmanian, to popular American textbook anthologies of poetry like *The Voice that is Great Within Us* (edited by Hayden Carruth). Bly’s dictum from the introduction to the anthology cited above explains how the socially-engaged forms of collectively representative poetry founded in 1930s literary practice have been outmoded by a new conviction surrounding the importance of interiority in poetry. This postwar renovation in poetry attempts what would “not have been accepted in the Thirties, namely, that what is needed to write good poems about the outward world is inwardness. [...] The truth is that the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy” (11). These forces combined to shore up a hieratic

cultural value for poetic voice, firmly establishing precedents drawn in part from the sovereign “poet-legislator” of the Romantic tradition, and in part from the Modernists, whose alienated poet-commentator—ironic, disaffected, infinitely permeable, and ultimately exonerated—seeks at the most to make things “new” and at the least to make things momentarily “cohere” within consciousness.

I argue that the pursuit of the “unmediated” in thought and expression is precisely that which symptomizes the *anti*-technological bent to such historically situated lyrical practices. Regardless of whether by means of the unconscious or the “oversoul,” such an approach will always strive to diminish the *poiēsis* of poetry, the “made-ness” of its alienated and human origin. In diminishing any version of premeditation, the responsibility for a poetic utterance is displaced—onto spirits, onto unconscious drives, or onto Language itself. This displacement of responsibility involves a displacement of *risk*; it is this displacement of poetic risk that Spicer, Rukeyser, Merrill, and H.D. resist and avoid, while yet operating along seemingly very similar procedures: from the Ouija board of Merrill, to the multiply-authored document of Rukeyser, from the psychoanalytic anamnesis of H.D., to Spicer’s (ironic) claim of receiving “dictation” from Martians.

These four poets demonstrate, by their experimentation with the seemingly anti-technological, a willingness to put the same thing at risk, and in question. These poets each challenge the myth of poetic inspiration by way of its most reified form: the voice. In this challenge, they diverge from that which oracular poetics clings to as a guarantor of coherent self and structure of address while in the process of engaging the unfathomable. In different ways, for these poets the question of technology offers a new mode or field of skepticism, one that can only be fully understood against this much broader backdrop of anti-technological spiritualism.

These poets each differently develop a theory of how the metaphysics of the lyric voice can be deconstructed, yet they do so for the purpose of re-conceiving forms of poetic responsibility and the establishment of an ethics for the voice as a “mode of production”: as a technology of expression.

Chapter One: Technology, Testimony, and Specters of Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*

My first chapter examines a poetics of commitment that fuses politics with technologies. Rukeyser’s *U.S.-I*, I argue, proceeds from the premise that only by calling technology’s outcome into doubt can we arrive at its ethical question. I will show how her *U.S.-I*, in part a poetic account of laborers harmed or killed in the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster, adapts *avant-garde* techniques of voice and pastiche to documentary practices, forging a competing technology of the document and its verifiability that is, I argue, an alternative theory of the political legitimization of speech. Rukeyser witnessing, as a foreign correspondent, the failure of anti-Fascist resistance in Spain, and she brought this premonitory experience to bear on her poetry of protest against the industrial cruelties of New Deal capitalism that sought to vitiate the American labor movement.

“Poetry can extend the document,” Muriel Rukeyser writes in the post-script to *U.S.-I*, a book that hopes to provide a poetic account of injustice and harm brought about by one specific event in the history of industrialized technology. The exact nature of this extension (and intervention) into technologies of the document is the question that I hope to pursue with respect to Rukeyser’s poetry. I investigate how Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* constructs a stand-point of

technology from the other side of the archive. Forging new uses for modernist techniques of pastiche and voice between the archaic, the bureaucratic, and the demotic, Rukeyser takes the role of the author to a further level of complication: if the political forms of agency and representation (legal, popular, aesthetic) are increasingly predicated upon technology, the next step will entail thinking through how technology quite literally “authors” us as a collective. Through a montage poetic apparatus, Rukeyser not only reciprocally stages testimony as poetry and poetry as witness, she also indicts legal and bureaucratic technologies of historical effacement mobilized during the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster. *The Book of the Dead* reveals that the increasing role of technology in adjudicating the social fields of representation, communication, and production does not necessarily offer neutrality or reciprocity to these fields. In this, Rukeyser’s apparatus poetics of the technological standpoint pose an important critique of the secularization thesis of modernity’s legitimation, from an innovative angle.

Blending these avant-garde tropes of poetic voice with emergent techniques that Rukeyser adapts from ethnography and documentary, Rukeyser creates a poetics of social commitment that is capable of including society’s imbrication with technology in its field of critique. Like Zukovsky’s *Testimony* (1932), *Book of the Dead* incorporates legal transcripts into its poetic form, but unlike Zukovsky, Rukeyser embeds these statements within many other discursive layers: phrases from an ancient Egyptian text of funeral rites, mathematical equations for hydroelectric power, folk songs, technological perspectivalism on American specters of settler colonialism, and ethnographic reporting. This indeterminacy of voice challenges the claim that the authenticity or verifiability of political speech is that which comprises its sole legitimizing principle. By undoing the political criteria of verifiability, the poem’s language is freed for a different mode of readerly consideration. Transcending the historic precedence of

technology's dehumanizing effects, Rukeyser's poetry envisions instead a properly ethical relation between humans and technology.

## Chapter Two: Deus Res Machina: Alien Language, Linguistic Technology, and the Case of the Serial Lyric in Jack Spicer's Poetry

In chapter two, I pursue the continuities and disjunctures between a poetic legacy of automatic writing in the oracular tradition and Spicer's own "poetics of dictation." Spicer reveled in certain contradictions between creation and encryption, poetry and language, mind and machine. His wry insistence that the poet was a technological device—"a radio"—was inspired by Cocteau's *Orfée* (Orpheus receiving dictation via car-radio). Drawing from a selection of Spicer's work, I read him as complicating modernist and surrealist notions of automatism and the unconscious. Spicer's post-lyrical seriality resists both closure *and* recursion, attempting a process-based poetic cognition within the context of emergent computer technology and its militarized frame, as "that which runs this country is an IBM machine connected to an IBM machine."

Spicer's poetico-technological state of inspiration comes through a descent to the underworld of knowledge that refuses Orphic abandonment by insisting on subjectivity's illusions as its truest and most telling "possession"—in every sense of the word. His poetico-technological inspiration would descend into *cogito*'s underworld yet refuse Orphic redemption: "Going into Hell so much tears it. Which explains poetry." Complicating those earlier notions of unconscious automatism that inspired the Surrealists, this underworld of cognition is an expression not of the Id but rather of language itself. Spicer, who insisted his poetic inspiration from extraterrestrial voices, who ran a popular workshop called "Poetry as Magic," and who



pursued a “poetics of dictation,” was constantly barricading himself against the dominant trends of his age—whether Beat poetry, Confessional poetry, or the Black Mountain versions of Projective verse—all of which Spicer accused of propagating the “big lie of the personal.” Yet this refusal of the “personal” was just as opposed to another ascendancy: New Criticism’s valorization of the “impersonal” as the hallmark of good poetry. Inspired by the anarchy of Dada, by the epic forms of Pound and Duncan (with whom he developed the genre of the “serial poem”), by the erratic pathos of medieval romance as an allegory for the nuclear age, and by the undecidability of language’s own mechanism thanks to recent developments in linguistics (he was a linguist by profession), Spicer constructed a singular body of work—witty and pejorative, irreverent and sincere—that insists on the insinuation of technological forms of cognition into every aspect of life.

Against the expressivist tendencies of his literary moment, Spicer swore an allegiance to the “outside,” to the unintelligible, unverifiable, and non-human sources of poetic inspiration, and yet, unlike his Dada forebears, he was not only interested in the solvent powers of nonsense. In the second half of his career, Spicer commenced to inveigh against the lyric, favorite vehicle of New Criticism or, in Spicer’s metonymic aspersion, The English Department. He indicted this genre as offering nothing more substantial than a poetic “one-night stand.” He devoted himself exclusively to the serial poem from this point onwards—an inaugural moment that, not insignificantly, involved the translation (and apocryphal supplementation) of Federico García Lorca’s work. The serial poem, for Spicer, involved a complex poetic apparatus of inextricable, interdependent, yet fundamentally heterogeneous permutations, often built around mythic figures like Orpheus, Billy the Kid, Rimbaud, or the characters from the grail legend. Spicer’s talent for making fugues of the counterintuitive and the incongruous pursued a new form of poetic loyalty

to the outcome that would countermand the imperatives of lyrical, subjective expression's timelessness and closure. Through his allegiance to unverifiable and non-human sources of inspiration, Spicer's explores how technological emergence shapes cultural and linguistic cognition. As a professional linguist in the age of IBM, Spicer confronts a depersonalized *cogito's* technological and epistemological alienation from expressive or natural language. Rather than attempting any reconfiguration of this naturalness, Spicer provokes linguistic paradoxes and questions for language's provenance through a practice of post-lyrical seriality. If the feedback loop is the automaton's answer to cognition, Spicer counters this instrumental model not with humanism but by urging a commitment to generativity of the "alien" in language.

### Chapter Three: Unresearchable Memory: H.D. and Freud in the Epoch of Machine Translation

Chapter three continues this posthuman inquiry: here, into the status of cultural memory. I read H.D.'s 1961 *Helen in Egypt* as an epithalamion to the age of information technology. I focus on how her lyric fragmentation collaborates with the poetic excavation of an undead archive to emphasize a technological origin for mythic transmission and poetry alike. As the database begins to supplant the archive, and as the task of translation becomes a matter of international intelligence turned over to the "machine translators" (Warren Weaver, et al.), *Helen in Egypt* is an epic of translation that reworks ancient problems of translation for the information age. Inspired by Freud's "mnemic apparatus," H.D.'s mythic revision suspends contemporaneous cybernetic dreams of consigning memory to the database and translation to the circuit.

*Helen in Egypt* rediscovers forgotten affiliations between mythic transmission, poetry, and technology. I show how H.D.'s revisionary translation of the Helen-myth presents human archives as approaching both disintegration and self-consciousness. Here, lyric fragmentation

collaborates with the excavation of Helen's own "subjectivity," unveiling an undead archive of memories: memories that have been written by myth. H.D.'s epic synthesizes several Helen myths, centering on those "eidolon" myths that say Helen was never in Troy: that the Greeks fought for a mere phantom. In a time in which forms of mythic transmission were being parceled out among the archives of anthropology, and as the human science of memory and cognition was leaving behind the arts and techniques of the unconscious to transition to the database, H.D.'s apparatus poetics seek to renew our awareness that history is not ontologically "present" so much as it is "written". For H.D., history is a technology: of writing—and language is a history of translation.

This third chapter considers these questions within the historical frame of the Cold War computational project of "machine translation." Looking at this early cybernetic computational project (designed to intercept enemy language without the cumbersome use of human translators) I read H.D.'s epic of translation as a challenge to this computational mindset. As I show, these respective technological and poetic projects partake in methods and figures drawn from a historically prior inquiry into the human "machine-mind": the work of Sigmund Freud. Inspired by Freud's "mnemic apparatus" in the human psyche, H.D.'s revision of the Helen myth presents the disintegration of archival translations as forms of arrested anamnesis. I read these projects back through their literary-scientific predecessor to retrace historical links between H.D. and Freud and to raise the question of the inhuman permanence of computational memory as well as what this "weaponization of translation" implies for language's technological future. Conceived as a conversation with Freud, *Helen in Egypt* reveals how translation might address the predicaments of the "machine-mind," constituting a poetic response to contemporaneous cybernetic dreams of extracting from language a guarantee of transparent translatability.

I also read H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*—her postwar mythopoetic recounting of her 1933-1934 analysis with Freud—as an intertext to *Helen in Egypt*. Here, we can see how H.D. begins to conceive of fragmenting the lyric voice *and* the translator's "task" towards an excavation and invocation of the archive and its future as memory. In *Helen in Egypt*, we see the figures of myth risking themselves by way of an almost Faustian inquiry into their own temporal efficacy and endurance.<sup>8</sup> These figures attain a glimpse of themselves not as archetypes or symbols but rather, in the language of psychoanalysis, as *symptoms* of translation and textuality: the effects of writing technologies. Corporeal inscriptions that reproduce themselves through time, these writing-effects as characters are yet possessed of the power to re-write themselves through a form of translational resistance. This chapter outlines how H.D.'s hybrid method of psychoanalysis and poetics deconstructs and condemns mythic national politics, urging instead *disbelief* in any history that claims it cannot be unwritten.

#### Chapter Four: James Merrill's Apparatus Poetics: Poetic Form and Epic Technology in *The Changing Light at Sandover*

If poetry is one human means of encoding its past, what does it mean for technology to be writing humanity's future? My final chapter explores these problems of archive and prediction, survival and prophecy, through Merrill's epic poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, an epic of automatic dictation that uses partially randomized transcripts to engage the aleatory in language. Merrill, in the writing of *Sandover*, engages in an apparatus poetics that allegorically refer to and situate inspiration's accidents within uncertain horizons. Thematically devoted to the theme of technological capture and nuclear war, Merrill's epic produces a formalist aesthetics

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<sup>8</sup> H.D.'s initial impetus to compose *Helen in Egypt* came from reading Eliza Marian Butler's 1952 novel, *The Fortunes of Faust* (Wasserman 1996: 169).

paradoxically founded on automatism, gesturing toward an impure account of language while staging history as a struggle between scientific knowledge and its imperiling technological apotheoses.

Robert von Hallberg, considering the style of Merrill's other poetry, says "The Ouija poem is just the poem Merrill should not have been able to write."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the originary powers of any author that Merrill wants to question, through the seeming antithetical powers of diversion, deferral, withdrawal, and noncooperation. This poem critiques the visionary tradition of poetic inspiration through its procedures as much as through its pronouncements. Merrill's apparatus poetics produce formalist aesthetics paradoxically founded on the automatism and the unknown. I contend that Merrill's aesthetics of skepticism sets his Ouija poem apart from similar projects (particularly Yeats's *A Vision*). Rather than gleaning pure poetic symbols from the spirits, Merrill orchestrates innumerable mediating consciousnesses towards an impure and decidedly Faustian theodicy of consciousness and history, where the dubiousness of its apparatus is the heart of its philosophy. Merrill's apparatus poetics can be contrasted to similar occult methods pursued by poets such as Yeats, Hughes, and Plath, in that in Merrill's work, the myriad voices and mediating consciousnesses of *The Changing Light at Sandover* are never resolved into one, lyric subjectivity. Merrill orchestrates innumerable mediating voices and "consciousnesses" that gesture toward an impure account of language. Merrill's apparatus poetics repurpose language's indeterminacy: installing language's "flaw" at the heart of his philosophy, Merrill seeks new poetic modes of becoming "unself-possessed." His formalist harmonics meditate explicitly on poetic form constituted by and through cooperation between the arbitrary and the recursive. This tense alliance simultaneously enables a philosophic non-

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<sup>9</sup> for an account of the general cultural reception of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, see Robert van Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*, 113-14.

cooperation with hegemonic pessimism, biological determinism, and all forms of reality's instrumentalization. Merrill's voices develop a philosophical method of the dialectical quarrel through a careful poetic harmonics of interruption and exchange.

To put humanity in question, one might argue, has been the proper work of poets for even longer than it has been the provenance of philosophers. This question arises as both a risk for humanity, and as the founding possibility of its future. The poetry of Merrill, H.D., Spicer, and Rukeyser can be seen equally in pursuit of that question which Heidegger raises: an inquiry into the ways in which *poiēsis* continues, as always, to lie *within* the purview of *technē*. Poetics, as one of technology's many modalities, thus emerges as heir to any critique of technology's future.

"Apparatus Poetica" reads these contemporary works as a means of rethinking current technological crises. Experimenting with process-based epics poised between poetic inspiration and technological process, conversant with an ethos of technological advance, these works contest language's computational reduction by experimenting with the formal yet unpredictable aspects that *technē* and *poiēsis* share. This project reads poetic theories of language against the mathematics of communication, highlighting historic affinities between poetry and technology, as well as their crucial differences.

Within these differences, as I argue, resides language's own philosophical and political meaning as an open, intersubjective system. Hoping to recover through language an ethics for technology, these poets commit their work not to reversing technology's historical development but rather to questioning its cultural hegemony. Amid global convergences of technological threat, innovation, and increasingly totalizing aspirations toward control, Spicer, H.D., Rukeyser, and Merrill re-theorize the precarious human subject in relation to uncertain process, orienting

their poetics to address language's new permutations under technological modernity. Their understanding of poetry as a procedural yet non-instrumental practice makes their experiments acutely relevant to an age in which it has become paramount to reassess the significance of what lies beyond calculation.

Framed by the contemporary annexation of language's powers for technological ends, these poets return us to the ethical import of language's unassimilated and ungovernable dimensions. Poetics, in its inspiration as in its manifestation, finds itself fundamentally affiliated with the ethical question concerning technology: how to bring about the revealing and not the coercing of the world. Apparatus poetics uniquely diverge from other prevailing modes of American poetic production in its deconstruction of voice's originary powers draws our attention to the ethical implications of poetry's fabrications. The goal is not to escape these conditions, but to be accountable for and to them: to redirect them. The question for apparatus poetics, then, is the threat as well as the rescue poised within the seemingly objective question of technology. These four poets find within the serially material, the vestigially determined, and the technological all that which is at the very heart of an artwork's production. The technological within poetry, as apparatus poetics can show, is poetry's enduring premise.

## CHAPTER 1

### Technology, Testimony, and Specters of Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser's

#### *The Book of the Dead*

In 1938, Muriel Rukeyser published her second book, *U.S. I*, which contained as its first half a long poem in the tradition of the late modernist epic, *The Book of the Dead*. This poem was a commemoration of the events of an industrial disaster, and subsequent corporate cover-up, surrounding the course of a tunnel excavation in West Virginia between the years of 1929 and 1932. While this tragedy, the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster, is still among the worst in American history, today it has mostly been forgotten—remembered only by labor historians and, thanks to Rukeyser, readers of twentieth century American poetry. Even in the geographic site of this disaster, the history of its occurrence has been all but effaced. Martin Cherniak writes, in his book-length historical account of the disaster, of how today, in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, the only commemorative object of the tunnel, which is now “deep underground and filled with water,” consists of “a road sign that praises technology without mentioning history.” This tunnel that proved lethal to hundreds of migrant and anonymously buried workers has become a “hidden artifact that can only be imagined.”<sup>10</sup>

In *The Book of the Dead*, it is this antagonism between history and technology that Rukeyser seeks to unsettle, experimenting with poetic techniques that might render imaginable the “hidden artifact” of technology. For Rukeyser, this hidden artifact may be buried beneath concrete and filled in with water, as is the Gauley Bridge tunnel today, but it may also be lying in plain view, *as technology itself*. The operations of technology nearly, but not entirely, obfuscate their material history: technology is not an artifact to be read—or so the story goes. Yet

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Wechsler, 227.



technology might also offer an artifact to *read by*. In her forward to Berenice Abbott's photo-documentary *Changing New York* (1939), Rukeyser describes the photographs as "pictures of things seen with such concentration that they can be called 'science' pictures"; as scientific pictures, they show a "vision of a world *in which all things look at us*, declaring themselves with a power we recognize" (emphasis mine, 10, 11). While the historical meaning of the technological artifact may be invisible to us, Rukeyser seems to identify the scientific gaze as that which creates apparatuses capable of *looking at us*. A power of unlocatable authorship resides in this technological return of gaze. Here, technology appears to take up an almost subjective position: it seems to "declare" itself. In reading Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, this question will come into focus through the addition of a third term, that of property relations. Under the heading of property relations comes much of Rukeyser's critique of technological modernity and capitalism: the history of violent territorial annexation in America, the rise of wage labor and its expropriation of value from the worker, the arrogation of common land and public goods in the name of industrial incorporation, even amid the "socialist" revisions of the New Deal in the 1930s. What is so crucial about Rukeyser's late modernist intervention into the question of technology is the way that she reworks certain poetic devices to elucidate how property is not first and foremost a mute partition of the material world. Property is made by claims and discourse, by performatives, testimonies, textual technologies of verification and authentication. Property, text, and voice are all bound up together, throughout history; yet in the age of advanced technology, these variables have taken on unworked-through complexities and force. To undertake an exegesis of this technological predicament is Rukeyser's aim, and in *The Book of the Dead*, this exegesis proceeds through an even more specific concern: the political

usefulness of concepts of “redemption” in procuring social justice for the living, and this, in the name of the dead.

Rukeyser’s career was shaped by and helped to shape the course of activist poetics on the Left during the 1930s. With allegiances to the Communist Party and working as an active proponent of the Popular Front at home and abroad, Rukeyser’s poetics was forged in the crucible of a particular set of questions that linked technology and poetry in the historical context of an international struggle over labor relations and property relations. One important question that also inverted the usual understanding of technology came into prominence in the 1930s, defining what I see as the transition to late modernism. Instead of questions concerning how the techniques and products of technology will creatively transform society (the question that vexed the Modernists), the question for late modernists could be said to be: whose side is technology on? Who will be consumed *by* this technology (i.e., who will labor for the machine)? Will the consumption of these lives be allowed to signify within the domain of cultural memory and social justice?

In her look at the operations of unregulated capitalism and wage slavery in *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser attempts to turn the mechanization of human labor against the very forces that would invisibilize this injustice. She strives to rethink “mechanization” so as to reconnect it to “humanization.” Rukeyser firmly believes in the potential *of* technology, but it is also her view that unjust exploitation of laborers, a process that transforms them *into* technology, is also what transforms technology into a harmful force. In *The Book of the Dead*, we might say, technology itself has been dehumanized—or, rather, technology has been rendered incapable of participating in a circuit of mutual visibility (such as that she imagines in the case of Abbott’s photographs). In this late modernist documentary epic of industrial history, Rukeyser works to reestablish the

link between consciousness and creation by crafting a poem that operates as a humanizing technology.

### Industry, History, and the Invisible Disaster

In 1929, the Dennis and Rinehart Company of Charlottesville, Virginia was contracted for the construction of a tunnel through a mountain. This tunnel was to be over three miles long and to be dug from Hawk's Nest (West Virginia) to Gauley's Junction. The Dennis and Rinehart Company in charge of this work had been contracted by New Kanawha Power Company, a West Virginia subsidiary of the increasingly powerful industrial conglomerate, Union Carbide.<sup>11</sup> A hydroelectric plant already existed at Gauley's Junction, and the plan was to divert the New River to run through this projected tunnel, to the hydroelectric plant at Gauley's Junction. That hydroelectric plant would then sell its power to the Electro-Metallurgical Company, another subsidiary of Union Carbide, located in Alloy, West Virginia.

The first accident of this industrial venture was profitable. During the digging of the tunnel, the workers came upon an enormous deposit of pure silica. Silica happens to be is a key component in the electro-processing of steel and of use to the Electro-Metallurgical Company (Union Carbide). Now, in addition to the electricity the diverted river would provide, the actual waste material of that excavation would be valuable in itself. Having first been digging a tunnel to divert the river, they next began diverting the tunnel itself to dig for silica. Safety codes at the time required masks and wet-drilling for silica, owing to the danger that the fine dust such drilling produced would pose for the workers' lungs. However, instead of providing the workers

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<sup>11</sup> The history of Union Carbide is itself a history of disaster, from the Gauley Bridge disaster in the 1930s to the Bhopal disaster in India in 1984. Union Carbide, founded in 1898, founded the petrochemical industry in the United States, installing the first commercial ethylene plant at Clendenin, West Virginia, in 1920. In 1939, Union Carbide also merged with the Bakelite Corporation, thereby entering the plastics industry as well. Union Carbide has been a wholly owned subsidiary of Dow Chemical Company since 2001.

with hydraulic water drills and the requisite masks, the miners were asked to dry-drill, a dangerous technique that leads to pulmonary silicosis. Union Carbide's contractors also decided not to distribute masks to the workers, in order to save the company the cost of the masks, and the cost of the labor time that would have been lost had the workers worn them (they would have had to stop periodically to cleanse the mask filter).

Workers soon began to sicken and die of pulmonary silicosis (fibroid phthisis). This condition comes about as the alveoli of lungs slowly and painfully solidify (hence the name "glass lung" disease). According to the lowest estimates, between 1931 and 1935, 475 workers had died of pulmonary silicosis, while others count 764 victims (Cherniak 1986), and high estimates of those affected reach 2,000 workers.<sup>12</sup> The cover-up by the company had involved company-paid doctors attributing workers' causes of death to such similarly presenting diseases as tuberculosis, as well as untold numbers of these workers having been buried anonymously in a cornfield, again, at the behest of the company. Had the company drawn from a local labor pool, this cover-up, in a rural West Virginia setting, would never have been feasible. However, the primary source of labor for the Gauley Bridge project was migrant workers who had been geographically displaced by the economic upheaval of the Great Depression. Three-fourths of those who died were African-American, a demographic inequity that had been purposely exacerbated by the company's choice to hierarchize laborers according to race: white laborers were generally given jobs less dangerous than that of drilling through the silica. The deaths of these workers could have easily been prevented by the use of masks, but the company, feeling that their workers were "not worth the \$2.50" for the mask, did nothing to prevent it (R. Shulman, 184).

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<sup>12</sup> Rosner and Markowitz's figure is 1500. Pulmonary silicosis (fibroid phthisis) causes the alveoli of the lungs to solidify, slowly suffocating the victim over the course of decades, or, in the case of acute exposure to silica, as in the Gauley Bridge incident, in a matter of months.

Once the workers began ailing and dying, compensation suits were brought against the Union Carbide. However, in order to evade paying these claims, Union Carbide began effacing the evidence of corporate negligence by bribing company doctors to misdiagnose the silicosis cases that came to them—as pneumonia, pleurisy, or tuberculosis. Workers who died were surreptitiously and cheaply buried in a local cornfield in unmarked graves, a job that Union Carbide employed the local undertaker to execute in secret. Union Carbide generally ignored the protests and personal injury lawsuits brought by victims’ families, which they could afford to do since most were too poor to retain proper legal counsel against the company and its team of corporate litigators (Rowe, 138). From beginning to end of this affair, Union Carbide seems to have proceeded with utter disregard for their workers, for the communities that supported their project, and for the environment. The express purpose had been, the company had claimed, a tunnel that would help generate electricity for public sale; but the real purpose had of course been to sell all the power to a subsidiary of Union Carbide, hijacking public works for private interest. However, thanks to the efforts of Left allied journalists and writers, this disaster was soon to be made public.

The January 8, 1935 edition of *The New Masses* ran a story by Albert Maltz entitled “Man on the Road.” It describes a worker of about thirty-five years who is hitchhiking out of Gauley Bridge, abandoning his family, and going off to die. In a letter he dictates to his wife, he explains that because no employer would think of hiring any miner who had worked in mining the Gauley Bridge tunnel, owing to their certainty of having developed silicosis, his opportunities for employment are now extinct:

Hit all comes from thet rock thet we all had to drill. Thet rock was silica and his was most all of hit glass. The powder frum this glass has got into the lungs of all the men war worked in thet tunel thru their breathin. And this has given to all of us a sickness. The doctors writ it down for me. Hit is silicosis. Hit makes the

lungs to git all scab like and then it stops the breathin (cited in Rosner and Markowiz, 96)

Thanks in part to such early articles in *The New Masses*, the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster soon came to widespread public attention as the worst industrial disaster the country had ever seen, occupying front pages and extended storylines in such widely read journals as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *Science* (Kalaidjian, 68). *The New Masses* among the first news sources to publicize the events of Gauley Bridge, including Philippa Allen's eye-witness report, "Two thousand dying on the job" (published under the name "Bernard" Allen).<sup>13</sup> While the scale of the disaster was enormous, the casualty figures were hard to pin down, owing to the earlier cover-up of Union Carbide.

By 1936, House subcommittee hearings were being held to address the problem, and it was here that the testimony of Philippa Allen, a New York social worker, would be given. Her testimony was, in one sense, the first draft of *The Book of the Dead*. Rukeyser would use the hearings transcripts of Allen in her poem dedicated to the industrial tragedy. That same year, Rukeyser began a trip to Spain to attend the anti-fascist Olympics in Barcelona.<sup>14</sup> She and a friend, Nancy Naumberg, a documentary photographer, journeyed from New York City to Gauley Bridge in order to see firsthand this site of entrained and disastrous diversions—the environmental damage of a diverted river, the human damage from controverted labor laws, the affront to justice constituted by corpses diverted to secret burials in a cornfield, and the diversion

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed listing of the literary work that had already been done on the Gauley Bridge disaster by the time Rukeyser's book came out, see R. Shulman, 181-83.

<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, in Berlin, Hitler presided over the official Olympic games, complete with the first ever torch run from Athens, Greece, and idea credited to the cinematic genius of Leni Riefenstahl, who conceived and filmed this month-long spectacle.

of just compensation denied to workers' families by the manipulated medical and legal systems.<sup>15</sup>

Although this scandal has entirely faded from popular imagination, literary historian Robert Shulman makes the important point that, at the time Rukeyser was writing *The Book of the Dead*, her relation to the subject material compared to “an epic poet dealing with traditional material”—since, thanks to the enormous amount of journalistic coverage, the Gauley Bridge disaster was on everyone's mind (184). What is of interest here is to consider which of the epic-poetic techniques—aesthetic, communicative, historical, documentary—contribute to redirecting and righting the powers of diverted justice. Rukeyser wrote shortly thereafter, in her biography of the American physicist Willard Gibbs: “when one is writing poems, when one is drawn through a passion to know people today and the web in which they, suffering, find themselves, to learn the people, to dissect the web, one deals with the processes themselves. To know the processes and the machines of process: plane and dynamo, gun and dam” (12). To know the machine of this process, Rukeyser would need to learn not only the workings of the hydroelectric dam at Gauley Junction, but also the clandestine inner workings of the industrial and political bureaucracy that could be so callously and thoughtlessly capable of turning a felicitous accident of into hundreds, or thousands of deaths at a savings of \$2.50 per mask.

### Book of Whose Dead? Gauley Bridge and the (Un)Making of Modern Myth

One particularly contentious aspect to this scandal with respect to its historical moment was the fact that this project had been undertaken by a subsidiary Union Carbide formed specifically for the purpose, New Kanawha Power. This subsidiary, however, was licensed as a

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, Nancy Naumberg's photographs from the trip did not survive, and it remains unclear how or if they were going to be used in the book, *U.S. I.* (Rowe, 232n8).

public utilities company, and its projects were allegedly obligated to provide jobs in the public sector, while constructing infrastructure for public use. That a “public” company should be the employer of these recklessly endangered migrant workers was scandalous; in addition to this, it was discovered that all the electrical power the New Kanawha Power Plant would generate after the diversion of the New River (the power plant for which the Gauley Bridge tunnel had been built) was going to be sold not to the public, but to the nearby Electro-Metallurgical Company. This Electro-Metallurgical Company, a private interest, was in the business of manufacturing steel. By felicity, then, the very tunnel being dug with public funds would first create electricity for this company’s private use, second, its excavation had provided it with an enormous supply of silica. The tunnel through the mountain, initially designed to divert a river, was diverted through the richest beds of the silica, killing ever more workers ever more quickly, while selling the “waste” products of its excavation to this same Electro-Metallurgical Company. On top of all this: the Electro-Metallurgical Company was itself owned by Union Carbide.

Thus, a big corporation (Union Carbide) manages to puppeteer the 1930s system of public works and social democratic labor policies first to provide itself with the alibi of state-sponsorship, second, to use state labor programs and public utilities initiatives to construct its privately owned infrastructure, and third, to profit twice over from a set of companies supposedly buying and selling to each other, but in reality, owned by the same source. Eventually, once the legal battle over liability claims reached the proportions of requiring its own Congressional subcommittee, the full extent of the antagonism between labor, social democracy, and contract law under capitalism would emerge. In this culminating moment of the disaster’s political adjudication before the nation, we may see this incident as a historical instantiation of certain



contradictions distinctive of political modernity. Moreover, these contradictions might remind us of those described by Karl Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

Writing amid the birth of myriad socialist movements, Marx views their potential for revolutionary change as limited by a fundamental failure of imagination with respect to the renovation of executive and legislative structures. This failure to fully reconceive these systems means that “Social Democracy is epitomised in the fact that democratic-republican institutions are demanded not as a means of doing away with both the extremes, capital and wage-labour, but of weakening their antagonism and transforming it into harmony” (43). To domesticate this antagonism into a harmony is not, of course, in the service of the worker, rather, it benefits the employer. Viewed from the framework of late New Deal politics in 1938, the scandal of the Gauley Bridge disaster appears, through Rukeyser’s poem, as a scandal not only for the state of United States labor conditions, but also as a scandal for the pestilent capitalism hiding beneath a progressively “socialist” patina. Rukeyser shows the socialist contract between the state and its people relies on a discourse of legitimacy that has been corrupted at its core by corporate machinations; this contract is unable or unwilling to ensure the fair treatment it promises.

Frustration with this socialist contract between representative democratic government and its collective subjects of capital provides Rukeyser with the lyrical occasion of one of the earlier poems in *The Book of the Dead*’s twenty poem sequence. This poem, entitled “Vivian Jones,” consists of a dramatic narrative in the tradition of industrial-era pastoral, set amid the ambiance of rural decay reminiscent of Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*. Vivian Jones, however, represents not the rustic figure so much as the *outmoded* or obsolescent figure of industrialization’s bygone phases. Jones appears beside “his locomotive rusted on the siding,” which is propped nearby the “old plantation-house (burned to the mud)” now no more than “a

hill-acre of ground.” Here we are given several historical wastelands at once: the ruins of the slave economy, the South’s withering importance having been sequestered from post-bellum networks of national and international trade (signified by railroads that have been discontinued). As a poetic speaker it is Vivian Jones who articulates the first strain of this long poem’s non-secular, non-documentary dimension, a dimension that we arrive at through his interiority. The fact that he is also the first character to be manifested through distinctly lyrical techniques suggests that the political uses Rukeyser finds for the lyric amid the larger structure of this contemporary epic may relate to the mystical, or, more precisely, the non-secular potentials of particularity in renovating collective bonds that have been sundered by technocratic capital, instrumental logic, and corporate atomization of the social contract. As we see from Jones’s perspective, meditating on the sight of the now diverted Kanawha river:

Never to be used, he thinks, never to spread its power,  
jinx on the rock, curse on the power-plant,  
hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass.  
[...]

all day the water rushes down its river,  
unused, has done its death-work in the country (18-19)

That Rukeyser’s speaker describes how hundreds of men could “breathe value” in the form of a raw material (silica) is a salient metaphoric substitution. This line is a reminder and a *revision* of that catachrestic superstition Marx declares to be endemic to the regime of industrial capital: the commodity fetish. Rukeyser’s metaphor performs the work of displacement of value into and onto material that the “phantasmagoria” of the commodity *is*, while also pointing to the need for a new analytic to describe the unique harm these workers suffer. That is, the commodity fetish is defined as existing entirely and materially distinct from its use-value (even in denial of its use-value). Use-value may inhere in the materials of extractive accumulation, such as this silica,

which possesses use-value for the electro-processing of steel. However, this use-value will be momentarily extinguished or irrelevant as the silica passes through the commodity form, that is, when it is sold as a raw material. Thus, according to a classical Marxist conception, the “value” that these workers are said to breathe is this future value: exchange value. Yet, in their lungs, the future “value” of this material is foreclosed. It turns into its opposite: waste. Even more perniciously, this embodied conversion of exchange value to waste, “robbing” the capitalist of the future of value, also takes a toll on the workers’ living bodies.

This inhaled silica proceeds to strip the workers of their vitality which, under capital, has next to no value as an existential fact; rather, the worker’s physical and temporal capacity to work is the only commodity they have to sell under the regime of wage-labor. The deep contradiction or paradox, then, that Rukeyser illuminates here is that a process of life, breathing, is coercively re-figured and re-valued under capitalism as not the perpetuation of the workers’ existence, but rather, from the standpoint of the capitalist, as the “breathing of value,” a process of life that transforms into slow death. This exposure of the capitalist perspective reveals with bitter irony the laborer’s impossible position within cycles of material extraction. Here we see that, for the worker, taking part in the creation of exchange-value means subjecting themselves not only to the employer but also and *even more acutely* to the raw material itself, to the future of value. This future is a future denied to the worker twice: first, through the unjust ratio of wage, and second, through the material fact of bodily harm and the shortening of life.

Once the vitality of the worker is not even worth a \$2.50 mask, once human life has been stripped of any transcendental value, its sustenance and valuation devolves upon the employer, who considers this life as entirely subsumed into its futurity: exchange-value’s creation. The question for Rukeyser is how to write a history of this damaging mode of futurity. The problem,

as she sees it, is the way in which the materials of industrial expropriation are themselves inextricable from natural and public goods—water, electricity, silica, time. There is no necessary alliance or allegiance that can ensure that these materials resist expropriation. The following extended passage shows this ambivalence particularly clearly, in that it can be read in two ways at once: as an encomium for industrial management of natural goods, *and* as a paean to the sublime or immanent power of the natural world:

This is the perfect fluid, having no age nor hours,  
surviving scarless, unaltered, loving rest,  
willing to run forever to find its peace  
in equal seas in currents of still glass.  
Effects of friction: to fight and pass again,  
learning its power, conquering boundaries,  
able to rise blind in revolts of tide,  
broken and sacrificed to flow resumed.  
Collecting eternally power. Spender of power,  
torn, never can be killed, speeded in filaments,  
million, its power can rest and rise forever,  
wait and be flexible. Be born again.  
nothing is lost, even among the wars,  
imperfect flow, confusion of force.  
It will rise. These are the phases of its face.  
It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.  
It changes. It does not die. (58)

The water producing electricity “speeded in filaments” is an elemental force that can never be killed or conquered, something that separates it from the status of the human laborers of the poem. This water, as an element, can only partially, therefore, figure the workers’ own powers of redemptive promise, “collecting eternally power.” The fact that the water is “able to rise blind in revolts” may sound like a prophecy of coming revolution, but the pun on electricity, with “volts,” signals that even the energies of revolution can be reincorporated into capitalist accumulation. “It changes. It does not die.” “It will rise.” What is left open is a future-historical space, in which water may or may not succeed in transcending the mechanism through which its natural force is transformed. Technology transforms man and nature alike into exploitable, profitable,

manageable forms of power, yet while the water, “surviving scarless,” may inspire a revolt, it cannot of itself fully represent or *prefigure* a revolt to those workers. Their scars, surviving or dead, are sufferings submerged beneath the artifact and the element’s heedless flow.

This ambivalent encomium helps us to read the ambiguity of Vivian Jones’s interior perspective. Considering the deadly history of capital, we may wonder, whether Vivian Jones is lamenting the fact that the river was ever used in the first place, or if he is caught up in a set of instrumentalizing judgments. Perhaps his “curse on the rock” lies in the fact that now it is not being used as it was intended, as a public works project for the benefit of the people. There is support for several readings in the larger context of the poem, since Rukeyser carefully sets the scene of this industrial disaster within an American historical framework dating back to the first settlers and their appropriative attitude toward the land. One poem that precedes this one, entitled “West Virginia,” describes how in “1671—Thomas Batts, Robert Fallam, / Thomas Wood, the Indian Perecute,/ and an unnamed indentured English servant” were the first settlers to trek to the West, traveling through West Virginia, and still looking for a passage to India: “They saw rivers flow west and hoped again. / Virginia speeding to another sea!” Unsatisfied with the vast tracts of land they have already appropriated, Rukeyser shows these pioneers to suffer from what could only be described as a *distinctively destructive form of hope*, embodied in the heritage of European settlement in the Americas. Of these pioneers, Rukeyser declares, “They left a record to our heritage, / breaking of records” (11). To equate these settlers’ aspiration to find a passage to India to a “breaking of records” indicates that their instrumental hope of lucrative territorial annexation entails severe collateral damage to indigenous heritages, archives, and ways of life.

Depicting this earlier historical moment through these settlers’ ghosts poised in their greed at the cliff overlooking the Kanawha Falls, Rukeyser gives us a superimposed premonition

in the lyrical present. This premonition gestures toward a relation with the Gauley Bridge disaster, whose industrial dimensions will intensify yet also repeat the diversion and breaking of records through a deliberate corporate cover-up. Seeking to thwart this repetition of the “breaking of records,” Rukeyser’s poem works against the secular logics of modernity that underlie these destructive forms of hope, logics grown increasingly *technological* in their manifestation. Yet Rukeyser does not seek to replace these secular logics with any previously existing schemas of moral philosophy or any paradigms drawn from religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> Instead, I see Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* as a project allied with what Walter Benjamin calls “the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination ... [which] resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (1929: 209).

On the surface, Benjamin’s theory of profane illumination is writing with a rather different aesthetic situation in mind: one in which the “last snapshot of the European intelligentsia” emerges through the work of the Surrealists. The Surrealists saw themselves as artists struggling to preserve human creative forces from the encroaching secular power of bourgeois rationalization. Acknowledging this aspiration, Benjamin nonetheless faults these members of the aesthetic vanguard for their uncritical technophilia, or “the movement’s overprecipitous embrace of the uncomprehended miracle of machine” (1929: 212). Benjamin shows that Surrealists weakness lies in their having mystified rather than critically integrated the promise of technology. The Surrealists, unable to identify what was at stake in the “uncomprehended miracle of the machine,” fall into a kind of frivolously mythical illumination.

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<sup>16</sup> One interesting and insightful reading of a poetic tradition of prophecy that draws on extant forms of religious moral conscience to incite social change can be found in George Shulman’s *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. In a chapter on Thoreau, Shulman examines “the poet in the office of the prophet” through Thoreau’s relation to the abolitionist legacy of John Brown, recasting faith as an anti-state force determined by personal conscience. Here prophetic politics provoke a crisis in consensus by shifting the valuation of a concept (slavery) till its envisioned future becomes divisive. The poetic valence to this particular prophetic stance its elimination of the prophet’s resentful stance, initiating a desire for the new. See Shulman, 39-88, esp. 57-67.

Meanwhile, the process of secularization moves hand in hand with the mystical and uncomprehended powers of the machine, a phenomenon that secularization theorist Peter Berger (in concert with Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner) has also characterized as a crucial distorting factor of modern consciousness. He writes, “the impressive edifice of modern science and technology *in toto* looms on the horizon of every activity of technological production... in the consciousness of the ordinary worker,” amounting to an industrial-technological edifice involving “a hierarchy of experts” who are most often anonymous (Berger, Berger, Kellner, 25).

Benjamin’s solution to the anonymous hierarchies and impersonal hieratics of technoscientific society is what he calls “profane illumination”; profane illumination is that “dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (1929: 216).<sup>17</sup> To phrase this slightly differently, the materialist anthropology of profane illumination reveals that the stakes of the “impenetrable” are alive and well within secular forms of the everyday. Thus, to return to Rukeyser’s technique of poetic haunting—that of the premonition superimposed on the lyrical present—we will see that it is not only the dead settlers who still watch in their greed. More importantly, the dead who have left the material fact of their productive labor remain present as traces in the land (a land which they as laborers under capital have no right to own). The premonition of their future redemption—not as laborers but as shareholders in a common land—is the utopian haunting which Rukeyser constructs in *The Book of the Dead* by showing that the yet uncomprehended miracle is not that of the machine: it is that of human labor. And the labor of the dead, a labor which continues to manifest anonymously through the on-going use of its material products and effects, constitutes both an empirical and a metaphysical haunting.

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Kalaidjian has also mentioned Benjamin’s concept of profane illumination in connection to Rukeyser’s work. See Kalaidjian, 87-88.

What I want to demonstrate through this reading of Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* is to connect this theory of historical-materialist haunting to Rukeyser's late modernist poetic concerns. More specifically, I want to show how, for Rukeyser, the future of redemption will be accessed only by a reconsideration of the "miracle of the machine," a miracle wholly owned and operated by incorporated industrialized America: by technocrats. Michael Thurston, writing on politically involved poetry from the period between the world wars, sees in Rukeyser's early work "a documentary modernism through which to train readers in a peculiarly elegiac politics" (173). As we have seen, if Rukeyser's poetry is elegiac, the structure of loss to which it refers is inextricably bound up with the dehumanizing tendencies of industrialization. As technology increasingly renders obsolete first the skilled labor of the worker and next even the physical body of the worker—in the process Marx referred to as the increasingly organic composition of capital, or "dead labor" concretized in the machine—what has been lost is the transcendent value of the *corporeal* human, and what stands in its place is the anonymous *incorporation* of labor, material resource, and even the landscape itself through joint-stock capital (more explicitly characterized in its French equivalent: *société anonyme*).<sup>18</sup> Thurston contrasts Rukeyser's 1930s poetics with Pound's 1930s cantos to elucidate the difference in the politics and ethos of their poetics so that "[w]hereas Pound imagines an artistic paradise, Rukeyser takes the first step on the long march through the industrial purgatorio of America" (189). Why the purgatorio and not the inferno? Are we to conceive of industrial America as a place to work through past wrongs, toward redemption? It seems that Rukeyser may have been inclined towards this view, perhaps

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<sup>18</sup> *Une société anonyme* is the civil-law regulated corporate form that parallels the form of corporation made possible under common law systems (such as America's) in the public limited company. A particularly impassioned and yet detailed analysis of this transformation of American industry into corporate forms was described as early as 1923 by Thorstein Veblen, in his *Absentee Ownership*, a book that Rukeyser might well have read.



borrowing from the postsecular eschatological dimensions of communist rhetoric about the factory floor as the stage for rehearsing the revolution.

But Rukeyser's focus seems also to be less on the imminent triumph of the living proletariat and more on the immanent suffering of the unmourned, anonymous labor that has made the industrial landscape historically possible. Indeed, Rukeyser intuitively understands that not only has industrialization robbed the worker of life and property, but also that the nature of industrial labor robs workers of their ability to properly grasp the meaning of their labor within history. The seriality and compartmentalizing character of mechanistic labor has similarly been speculated to habituate its subjects not only to the separation of means and ends, but also to the separation of worker's specific knowledge from its application to the larger world (Berger, Berger, Keller, 29). This segregation of historical knowledge is precisely what Rukeyser would combat, although, as John Carlos Rowe has argued, "unlike such modernist tours de force as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction, *The Book of the Dead* does not claim to master its subject or substitute its poetic achievement (or form) for modern corruption." Rukeyser insists on a speculative distance between the poem she writes and the subject she writes about, primarily because this distance refuses the spectatorial salve of embittered superiority or sympathy. Rukeyser may see politically engaged poetry as a means to an end, but she refuses any aesthetic substitution of means *for* the end, which raises the question of the documentary inflection to Rukeyser's poetics. Rowe sees that, in Rukeyser's epic, "[t]he subject position of the poetic author ...is not offered as an 'answer' to the social problems represented"; instead Rukeyser combines the documentary with the avant-garde through techniques that "tend to minimize the poetic author's own controlling presence" (138).

What might be investigated here is the way in which this late modernist practice combines a minimization of authorial control with the practices of documentation, conceiving itself as producing a poetically and aesthetically salient work. This practice involves a reconceptualization not simply of the “presence” of the author, but rather the very nature *of* authorial “control” itself. I would argue that this reconceptualization was less concerned with issues of “control” and more with the problem of production. Moreover, this shift in emphasis from artistic control to artistic production mirrored larger historical developments concerning (economic) value in the industrial age, as free markets, corporate capital, and relatively unprotected wage labor were increasingly focalized by massive and monopoly-driven interlocking technological infrastructures—such as the network of mutually profiting industrial concerns wrapped up in the Gauley Bridge disaster.

Rukeyser’s poetic career is a response to American technological and industrial realities of incorporation in the first decades of the twentieth century, a trend that had recently taken on monolithic proportions. According to historian Alan Trachtenberg:

By 1904... about three hundred industrial corporations had won control over more than two fifths of all manufacturing in the country, affecting the operations of about four fifths of the nation’s industries. ...By 1929, the two hundred largest corporations held 48 percent of all corporate assets (excluding banks and insurance companies) and 58 percent of net capital assets such as land, buildings, and machinery. (4-5)

The incorporation of America, crucially, concerned not only the consolidation of *property* rights into the hands of a privileged few but also the productive *technologies* that increased the extraction of surplus-value from labor. This industrial technology was an economic but also a *lived* reality for those in its employ, and it had environmental, embodied, rhetorical, aesthetic, and cultural effects on the wage-earning classes and the culture more generally. Trachtenberg explains:

...by the 1890's the corporate office virtually dominated the work place, imposing demands for speed, regularity, and quotas of output. As a result, human effort fell more and more into mechanical categories, *as if the laborer might also be conceived as an interchangeable part*..... The process of continual refinement and rationalization of machinery, leading to twentieth-century automation, represented to industrial workers a steady erosion of their autonomy, their control, and their crafts." (emphasis added, 56)

Certainly this was not the first time in history that laborers had been perceived as interchangeable and, relatedly, disposable. What is new here is that the human laborer has been reconceived not as a mere replacement for another laborer, defined by the logic of indefinite substitution; rather, the laborer's indefiniteness or foreclosed singularity is replaced by a functional and articulated form of interchangeability. The worker is seen as a part of an integral whole: the machine of industrial production. How then did the social poetics of "incorporated America" and the interchangeable machinery of subjects play itself out in the late modernist milieu?

One representative statement regarding the complex function of the author at the threshold of late modernism can be gleaned from John Dos Passos, whose 1930s *Trilogy* has been dubbed by cultural historian Michael Denning the "Ur-text" for Popular Front politics in America: Dos Passos claims, in keeping with figurations borrowed from modernist responses to technology, that "a writer is after all only a machine for absorbing and arranging certain sequences of words out of the lives of the people around him" (81). Writing on the international literary currents surrounding Rukeyser, Stephanie Hartman elaborates on such a machinic ethos, in which "artists were eager to claim that the machine revolutionized not only aesthetics, but conceptions of humanity," making them receptive to "the idea of the 'artist engineer' or 'mechanical hero' who wedded art and technology," by supporting a trend which judged "all art that did not reflect and celebrate the mechanical as drearily humanist and passé" (215). This

milieu of technological and literary ferment influenced Rukeyser at the start of her career: in fact, Rukeyser knew Dos Passos (they had both been editors at the *Student Review*) and her artistic style, as many critics have noted, was influenced in part by his.<sup>19</sup> In Dos Passos's 1935 essay "The Writer as Technician," written for the American Writers' Congress, he expresses a similar figuration for technological aesthesis as labor, declaring that "in his relation to society a professional writer is a technician just as much as an electrical engineer is" (169). While such ideas are clearly steeped in the figural ethos of the mechanical, however, it is not necessarily the case that they were also *celebrations* of the mechanical. In contrast to the often technophilic euphoria of modernism, late modernism, I would argue, is defined primarily by its growing ambivalence concerning technology. Importantly, this ambivalence *refuses to jettison the question of technology*. Modernism's aesthetic question is preserved ("how can artists catch up to the creative progress of science and technology?") but with a difference, in a movement within late modernism of which I find Rukeyser to offer a particularly thought-provoking example.

This late modernist difference concerns the newly collective risks and social implications these artists came to recognize within technological modernity. Even in these statements from Dos Passos, we may note that if the writer is the machine, that machine is documenting the lives of the people who *surround* the artist. If the writer is a technician, the writer is such "in relation to society." This update on Shelley's famous pronouncement that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world makes writers its unacknowledged technicians. The crucial difference in imaginary here is that, where the legislator will *decide* how something works, the technician must be adept in the *knowledge* of how a preconstituted entity has been designed to work. This imaginary involves a new formula for change, as well: where the legislator changes a state of affairs through fiat, a technician can only change things by altering the function of what already

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<sup>19</sup> Daniels connects Rukeyser's techniques in *U.S. 1*'s "Book of the Dead" to John Dos Passos's novel, *1919* (250).

exists. The revolution of which the writer-technician is capable is the *détournement* of pre-existing conditions for different ends. Shelley, of course, links the poet not only to the law-giver but also to the prophet, a prophet whose work sounds remarkably influenced by the natural sciences of Shelley's day: they are "legislators, or prophets," they unite these roles. Shelley's poet "not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time." There is a productive tension in Shelley's romantic figure of the poet—the poet both gives laws and discovers laws, the poet is jurist and scientist at once—while also, in a third sense, seeing "the future in the present," a prophet. In her late modernist reconsideration of testimony, technology, and the unredeemed claims of the dead, then, Rukeyser embodies all three of these roles, jurist, technician, prophet. On the eve of the second world war, in these final moments before the horrors of the mid-century conflict with imperial fascism, Rukeyser seems already to glimpse that, on *both* sides of the war (Auschwitz, Hiroshima), this future violence will have ultimately technologically stakes and provenance. What will poetic prophecy have to say about the social force of technology? What "future in the present" of technology itself might at this moment become visible?

#### Apparatus, Apparition: Poetry from the Future of Technology

"The time for prophecy is almost over," writes Horace Gregory in 1936, in his editor's introduction to *Poetry* magazine's May issue (98). He prognosticates that "in the next five years," the future of myriad, competing political ideologies will arrive at an unavoidable conflict, and a final resolution. A sense of the imminence of this political resolution seems to have been what all the poets included in the issue held in common. This 1936 May issue included work

from contemporary political poets: Muriel Rukeyser appears here, alongside Josephine Miles, John Wheelwright, Edwin Rolfe, and Kenneth Fearing. For its editor Gregory, however, the criteria for inclusion were premised on nearly outmoded principles. That is, from the perspective of the literary Left, visions of emancipatory politics had been thrown into disarray and often disillusionment by recent international developments like Italian and German Fascism, the transition in the USSR from Leninism to Stalinism, and a national anxiety that American New Deal liberal socialism would end up having little effect toward the just redistribution of wealth across entrenched racial and class lines. With any organizing criterion for “the Left” having become increasingly uncertain, the mere fact of these poets’ constellation by Gregory raised unavoidable questions regarding the future of Left politics in America.

Yet in Gregory’s declaration that “the time for prophecy is almost over” (ironically, itself a prophetic statement) the importance of the prophetic and the premonitory as valences within the discourse of 1930s politics is still implicitly foregrounded. By this statement, Gregory insinuates that contemporary politics involves not only the struggle over social reorganization, but also a second, and perhaps more complex struggle: over discourses of redemption. Whether or not the time for prophecy can ever be concluded, Gregory’s remark makes clear that, by 1936, prevailing political discourses of redemption (Marxist Communism, liberal socialism, Popular Frontism, even representative democracy) were being forced to a crisis to deliver.

In 1936, Rukeyser was a newcomer to the poetry scene, having won the Yale Series prize for her *Theory of Flight* the previous year (aged only 21). As Kate Daniels writes, Rukeyser “flung herself headfirst into the literary quarrels of the 1930s by publishing, in her first book, poems that were simultaneously tied to the apolitical and highly aesthetic tradition of high modernism and to a self-conscious left-wing political identity derived from Marxist theory”

(250). Although it was Marxist versions of history that had much to say about the near future at this time, American literature has always had an interest in the prophetic mode. George Shulman has written eloquently of the political importance of prophecy in American literature. Discussing Thoreau's premonitions and prophecies "as he moves between Protestant and romantic, theistic and poetic, moral and aesthetic registers of language," Shulman sees this fluidity as enabling him to be "a witness and watchman announcing collective liability and demanding a decision about the servitude that enables American freedom" (41). Here I would also emphasize that the "prophetic" mode in American poetry in particular may well relate to a stylistics and a poetics more than to a genre of content: as Shulman's description suggests, it may be that the aesthetic signature of literary prophecy consists in its labile shifts of discursive modes. I would place Rukeyser's prophetic mode within this larger American tradition of constructing vernacular forms of accountability (supplementary to and often in advance of the legal). Rukeyser entered an exciting milieu of artists with bitterly opposed but perhaps still antagonistically generative positions in aesthetic politics. The primary literary battles were being waged between Left proponents of high modernism as a platform capable of social critique and the dogmatically Marxist proletcult literary enclaves centered around journals like *The New Masses*. Rukeyser held a median position between these two camps, both of whose ideals she embraced and struggled to bring together in her writing.

Yet the disarray of Left politics had also resulted in certain syntheses around shared lines of opposition. Rukeyser would have been influenced by the Popular Front aesthetic put forward by the seventh Comintern held in 1935 where, "mobilized by the consolidation of Nazi power in Germany and fascism in Italy, European Communists recognized the difference between bourgeois Fascist regimes and bourgeois democratic states," opting for "solidarity with the latter

to provide collective security from the former” (Thurston, 177). This solidarity, which led to a broader alliance between the Communist party and Left politics than previously, provided a context of political links, re-established or forged, exclusionary dogma reconsidered, and a general search for convergent allegiances across social and political lines. Rukeyser flourished this context of unprecedented alliances, yet Gregory’s skepticism concerned precisely these uneven ideological hybrids. Speaking of these poets’ sympathy for Marxism, he worries that their literary merit suffers, as “contemporary American poetry of this group is less literary, more violent, more aware of a definite class conflict in an urban environment where hope of victory rests upon a prophecy to be found in Marxian dialectic” (96).

If the time of prophecy is “almost over,” does that mean the time of Marxist dialectical fulfillment is suddenly at hand, or, suddenly out of reach? Gregory refuses to answer this question, saying instead that “what I consider most important is this: that all the poetry represented here reveals a change in poetic belief since 1929, and that the clearest evidence of that change is shown in the work of the younger and avowedly communist poets” (92). If the profoundly secular utopianism of communist ideology can undergo a “crisis of belief”, what does this (re)emergence of “belief” indicate for the future of a utopia in crisis? It may be that this moment of political crisis gives rise to a new form of “postsecular utopianism.” This crisis of poetic belief articulated by Gregory resonates with the conflict addressed by Bill Martin in his *Politics in the Impasse* (1996)—a conflict that Martin believes is internal to the history of Marxism itself. Martin argues, in this exploration in postsecular social theory, that there is an unavoidable conflict “between the secular logic of Marxism and the logic of community, which, in its historical development, has not been secular”; his project delineates the current need to



theorize a communitarian dimension for the future of Marxism (77).<sup>20</sup> If, then, any postsecular Marxism can be defined by its pursuit of a theory of communitarianism (beyond the uniting of all workers under the auspices of General Labor), this postsecular Marxism must negotiate differently the struggle over the discourse of redemption. Postsecular utopianism, Marxist or otherwise, will be forced to reconfigure the crucial concept of redemption itself, so as to avoid the tragic pitfalls of normative identitarianism as a *de facto* basis for community.

Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* experiments with what I believe to be a solution to this problem, employing a historical-materialist poetics to evoke the stratified layers of exploitation, expropriation, internecine war, and genocide that constitute the "uniting" of the United States. She does this not only so as to expose the unresolved guilt of the past, but more importantly to suggest that by envisioning this co-presence of the unredeemed, through poetry, we see not a fictional synchrony but rather a material *reality* that certain historical effacements have occluded. The material reality that Rukeyser focuses on is that of technological expansion, a phenomenon coextensive with both the harmful forces of "progress" *and* to the effacement of this harm. For example, in *The Book of the Dead*, the poem "West Virginia" progresses through the spectral remnants of the Civil War by illuminating how certain historical-political aspirations endure, unacknowledged, within technological artifacts. Here, technological military infrastructure signifies a premonition of the politics that define the later, corporate forms of economic development. Rukeyser evokes apparitions on the landscape, "troops / here in Gauley Bridge, Union headquarters, lines/ bring in the military telegraph. / Wires over the gash of gorge and height of pine" (12). The troops have vanished, yet the result of their labor remains in operation as the telegraph. The fratricidal ring of violence in the quasi-onomatopoeic, "gash" and "gorge,"

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<sup>20</sup> See pages 71-92 for an extended elaboration of these possibilities for a communitarian historical materialism; see also pages 105-121 for Marxism's ethical possibilities (via Kant).

both denote and sonically mimic the deforestation of the valley for its pine trees, used for telegraph poles. Run by electricity created by damming the valley's river, as a machine the telegraph is inherited from what Rukeyser depicts as a painful and specific historical moment, a moment whose pain continues into the present. This present is declared to be still haunted by the forces of nature exploited and the forces of laborers now dead:

... it was always the water  
the power flying deep  
green rivers cut the rock  
rapids boiled down,  
a scene of power.

Done by the dead.  
Discovery learned it.  
And the living?

Live country filling west,  
knotted the glassy rivers;  
like valleys, opening mines,  
coming to life. (12)

The ambiguity here concerns what is coming to life. Is it the subterranean depths of the mines? The dead? The populating of the countryside? This ambiguity allows for a poetic cohabitation of nature, the dead, and the living. "Done by the dead," the usable state of the present is only discovered through nonacquisitive forms of humility. The usable present is a making and an invention of the past, it is a *poiēsis* of the dead. In pursuit of power, the living will open the ground only to bring the dead again to life, concretized in their telegraph networks, their hydroelectric dams.

*The Book of the Dead* shows us more than simply the injustice of the brutal social system that alienates and exploits workers' labor—whether by focusing on the waters of the past that wore down the gorge, or the past laborers who built the telegraph lines that helped win the war, consolidate the union for industrialization, and now inspire still further need for electrical

communications infrastructure. *The Book of the Dead* reveals the ultimate dependence of rapacious exploitation upon the one truly enduring power, that which is “Done by the dead.” Yet to realize this, merely, is not yet to transcend the damage that has been done to the dead. In “The Dam,” a poem that occurs toward the epic’s conclusion, Rukeyser depicts the corrupting symbiotic stasis that exists at present between industrial capital and its continued ownership of land and labor’s artifacts. Here, in a portrait of initially elegiac tone, the poem quickly swerves to show the perversion of nature’s forces—for although “All power is saved, having no end. Rises/ in the green season, in the sudden season,” according to natural rhythms, the water is further personified to show its current subservience to capital:

Water celebrates, yielding continually  
sheeted and fast in its overfall  
slips down the rock, evades the pillars  
[...]  
White brilliant function of the land’s disease (54).

Describing in nearly parodic machine-age rhapsody the “crackle of light, cleanest velocity” of the hydroelectric dam, Rukeyser does not seek to praise the beauty of machine forms or industrial kinetics. She next inserts a quotation in the voice of the Egyptian Book of the Dead: “*Phoenix, I sail over the phoenix world/ Diverted water...*” (55), and the lyrical passage gives way to a technological pastiche pregnant with symbolism:

What is a year in terms of falling water?  
Cylinders; kilowatts; capacities.  
Continuity:  $\Sigma Q = 0$   
Equations for falling water. The streaming motion.  
The balance-sheet of energy that flows  
passing along its infinite barrier. (55)

To think of a year in terms of kilowatts recapitulates the alienation and quantification of the laborer’s time through the system of wage-labor. The “infinite barrier” of the electrical reservoir here replaces, in sharp contrast, any other form of transcendental experience one might associate

with the dynamic sublime of observing a massive waterfall. That is, instead of a Romantic (or Kantian) experience of the exhilaration of subjective cognition at its sublime limits, we are presented with “Equations for falling water... The balance-sheet of energy” and the tidy recuperation of immensity.

Yet Rukeyser does not seek to foment pessimism about the current state of capital—rather, she seeks to read the haunted systems of capital as superimposed in the lyrical present with the triumphant collective of the dead. Rukeyser’s superimposed and juxtaposed lyrical present parallels the strategy of what Benjamin proposed as an “image space” that could transcend the contemplative pessimism of the intelligentsia: “To organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image space. This image space, however, can no longer be measured out by contemplation.” While Benjamin sees that the revolutionary intelligentsia need to make contact with the proletarian masses, he locates an obstacle to this encounter within the fact that this contact “can no longer be performed contemplatively” (1929: 212). Instead, Benjamin advises that the artist seek out:

the space, in a word, in which political materialism and physical creatureliness share the inner man...with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untorn. ...This will still be an image space and, more concretely, a body space. For in the end... there is a residue. The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when, in technology, body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.”  
(1929: 217-18)

I will draw on the complexities of this fascinating passage in the argument to come, but here I would point out the absolute correspondence between Benjamin’s call for the artist to find a

“body space” for the collective, a space of “physical creatureliness,” where “no limb remains untorn,” and Rukeyser’s dead collectivity which interpenetrate and haunt the public works they died in order to build. Here, we deal not with bodily “innervations,” but bodily *enervations*, a sign that reality has not yet transcended itself in the Marxist sense. As the workers “breathe value” which brings about their own death, we see the perilous side to when “in technology, body and image space so interpenetrate.” And yet all that is “Done by the dead” cannot be subsumed under an eternally tragic logic.

Rukeyser, in the spirit of Benjamin, is searching for the “interpenetration” of body and technology that can innervate and enrich—yet this will be possible only when reality “transcends itself”. For now, seemingly poised on the cusp of transcendence “It breaks the hills, cracking the riches wide, / runs through electric wires; /it comes, warning the night, [...] a single force to waken our eyes” (56). To what are we being awakened? It may be to the labor of the workers that made the dam, the tunnel, the electricity; it may be to their labor as their after-life, coming back materially in the form of this flowing electricity. If so, in this quasi-spiritual vengeance, these dead who died for the electricity of the capitalists now are resurrected by and through the nationwide electrical infrastructure required to spread the news of their unjust death. Broadcast through the popular media, this electrical communicative network accuses those who “Blasted, and stocks went up;/ insured the base,/ and limousines/ wrote their own graphs” (56).

Returning to Horace Gregory’s 1936 issue of *Poetry*, we may consider one assertion he makes regarding the nature and dilemma of redemptive politics in general: “Among the changes in underlying belief,” he writes, “there are always revivals which are inherited from times other than our own” (97). As Gregory insinuates that inheritance, anachronism, and revival are themselves revolutionary forces, he hearkens back to the eloquent analysis of revolutionary

anachronism that may be found in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. On the other hand, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* presents the political "revivals" of other times as either hopelessly transient or downright despicable, and in this treatise Marx famously pronounces, spurning the ghosts of history, that "[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (16). Sufficient doubt remains as to the political usefulness of the dead in a Marxist politics of redemption, yet persistent commitment to the political value of the dead defines two of the most famous elucidations of alternative Marxist futures in a postsecular vein: Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), and Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993).

In his Twelfth Thesis, Benjamin insightfully notes that the cunning of counter-revolutionary social democracy was how it "thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (emphasis mine). That is, the future of the dead, not the future of the present, is the most revolutionary future. The future of the present tends instead towards a reproduction of that which *is*—not that which *ought*—to be. Justice, for Benjamin, resides not in a metaphysical ideal but in an unquenchable quality inhering in the unfinished past, a quality might be said to relate to the ghostly work of mourning identified by Derrida's "spectropolitics" and "genealogy of ghosts" in his *Specters of Marx*. This spectropolitics of mourning "responds to the injunction of a justice which, beyond right or law, rises up in the very respect owed to whoever is not, no longer or not yet, living, presently living" (121). Stemming especially from what Derrida diagnoses as the "untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary," his more ambivalent reading of the ghost

finds that “There are several times of the specter. It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future” (123). Hence, Marx’s derision of the specter, and trust in a poetry of the future.

Yet what Marx also and nonetheless recognizes, according to Derrida’s reading of the complex delineations between *Gespenst* (ghost) and *Geist* (spirit) of history is that a form of the fantastic “as general as it is irreducible” is the force which organizes of historical repetitions and revivals; “this other transcendental imagination,” the spectropolitical, “is the law of an invincible anachrony” such that “the spirit of the revolution is fantastic and anachronistic through and through” (140). This spirit of the revolution seems to hold a “fantastic and anachronistic” potential for the postsecular re-visioning of redemptive politics. Rukeyser, similar to Marx and even more in sympathy with Benjamin, equally pursues, in *The Book of the Dead*, a poetic renovation of the political potential of the dead, here through a specific form of poetic historical materialism. This long “documentary” poem—which stages both an exposé and an elegy for the miner victims of the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster—shares in the spirit of a postsecular Marxist communitarianism. That is, it locates the “poetry of its revolution,” *pace* Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, precisely in the past, or rather, in the *unfulfilled future of the dead*.

Freed from any hegemonic religious paradigm, the concept of “the dead” works in Rukeyser’s poem in a postsecular, revolutionary way. As I will show, Rukeyser dismantles the vicious cycle of secular, capitalist forms of exchange and surplus accumulation through an encomium to the dead that operates on a *materialist* level while yet continually extricating itself from any empirical, secular capture. It was in this sense entirely just for a contemporary review of Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* to have characterized it as “part journalism, part lyricism,

part Marxian mysticism” (cited in Wechsler, 226).<sup>21</sup> While “Marxian mysticism” was intended as a term of derision—both for Rukeyser, and for Marxism—I believe this indicates how palpable was the immanently postsecular form of historical materialism at work in Rukeyser’s poem. Rukeyser might help us to re-imagine the Marxism that Bill Martin believes has been missing from postsocial theory—as he laments that, apart from Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Marxism was unwilling “to speak in the language of redemption” (8).<sup>22</sup> Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*, showing us a version of historical materialism antagonistic to the premises of secular, capitalist society, while at the same time resisting any predictive teleology, insisting instead that we are responsible “at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future” (Rukeyser 1949: 21). The question remains: will the technology we bring to the future constitute a tradition or a repression? Do any powers of redemption inhere in our technology, or will its history of destruction continue to determine an infinite series of unavoidable repetitions? These questions are the provocations not only of *The Book of the Dead*, they are also the questions that haunt the diminishing power of prophecy and rhetorics of redemption in technological modernity, particularly after the beginning of Fascist militarization. This meant that complex negotiations of technology as “form” and technology as metonymic politics came to define the aesthetics of late modernism.

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<sup>21</sup> A critical tendency to emphasize the aesthetic and politically diverse range of this poem as “chimerical” or unintegrated persists: Kate Daniels is representative of this consensus of characterizing Rukeyser’s poetry from the 1930s as “simultaneously tied to the apolitical and highly aesthetic tradition of high modernism and to a self-conscious left-wing political identity derived from Marxist theory” (250).

<sup>22</sup> For Martin, “A postsecular social theory is to be counter-posed to a capitalism that has become postmodern and hyper-secular: coldly secular, stifling of the ability to generate ethical vision, of a fundamental regard for the other. Life itself becomes calculation” (8). Martin goes to far as to describe hyper-secular Marxism as having been part of the problem of constructing society as instrumentalized and calculating; he offers postsecular theory as the ameliorating power to re-imagine the bonds of community not only after the secular, but also, after communism (9).



### Late Modernist Apparatus: The Lyro-Technic Eye

As mentioned above, modernist writers who sought to derive their poetic methods from imitations of technology were able to do so in a relatively unambiguously progressivist, presentist, or (eponymously) futurist way. Modernism's aesthetic reaction *against* technology seems primarily to have been contained within accusations of technology's deleterious effects on social hierarchies: i.e., the increasing "massification" of culture enabled by what Benjamin himself lauded—the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction. More predominantly, arguments have been made for the porous boundary between modernist aesthetic and machinic technique.<sup>23</sup> Uncritical imitation of technology or the ecstatic hypostasis of mind into machine may not have been at the forefront of High Modernist artistic concerns, yet the Futurists, and certain Soviet pioneers of cinema—Vertov, Eisenstein, et al.—sought to achieve precisely this melding of human and technic sensoria. It was thanks in part to modernist Soviet iterations of technophilic discourse that American writers in the 1930s affiliated with the Communist Party were able to index their politics through their aesthetics: employing rhetoric of technologico-human synthesis in fact make them legibly Left, Fascist appropriations of Futurism notwithstanding.

Yet Rukeyser synthesized a variety of aesthetic positions in her writing, and it was this commitment of hers to aesthetic hybrids and experimentations that caused her to be considered with certain suspicion within her particular political context of the late 1930s. Innovative blending of two procedures or styles recognizably oppositional in their political associations, if not in their content, was seen in such polarized times not as revolutionary but as compromised.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Hugh Kenner's *Mechanic Muse* (1987) in which Joyce's writing is linked to the cinema, and Eliot to the telephone.

Thus, *U.S. 1* and its long poem, *Book of the Dead*, fomented a good deal of controversy among its readers and reviewers. Thurston's explanation for this generally skeptical contemporary reception was that the book was seen as "too documentary, too poetic, too stridently anticapitalist, and too cravenly procapitalist all at once" (173). In short, the politics of *U.S. 1* were far from sloganeering, despite the incendiary nature of its subject matter. John Carlos Rowe, looking back on the synthesis that *The Book of the Dead* tried to catalyze between high-modernist aesthetics and Left politics, despite its being "criticized in its own time by both dogmatic leftists and the conservative Right, the poem does not so much chart out some 'middle ground' as attempt to overcome the ideological limitation of both political perspectives" (137). The book's quotient of legibility within existing categories was obstructed precisely because the book sought to re-configure the parameters of these categories.

As noted above, although the "controlling presence" may be minimized, to erase this presence entirely might have the effect of promoting a fiction of "pure" documentary: of unsullied objectivity, uncomplicated factuality, and unmotivated deixis. This resistance to appearing purely objective is an important strategy of Rukeyser's especially given the overwhelming trends of the American 1930s which blended journalism, art, and ethnography through the newly mastered modes of "mechanical" reproduction: the photo-documentary and the cinema. The context in which *The Book of the Dead* appeared was already populated by many important works of 1930s documentary photographers. These photographs—of a suffering and victimized American public—were generally accompanied by text, and in this they cited the tradition of Jacob Riis's influential and pioneering work in the genre, dating from 1898 (*How the Other Half Lives*—a photographic portrait of New York City's slums combined with exposé journalism). Affiliated with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography project,

Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* clearly articulates its aesthetic strategies within a context that included such landmark works as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938), Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938), Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939), Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York* (1939), Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

This aesthetic, cultural, and political milieu helped inspire the poetry of the Objectivist group, and its subsequent imitators. Shoshana Wechsler has noted Rukeyser's many points of correspondence with the Objectivists, such as "Louis Zukovsky's manifesto-like formulation of the poem as lens and Rukeyser's minute and probing enactment of it; a common emphasis on the scientificity of poetry, on the concreteness of its materials, and, ultimately, on the status of signs as facts," which Wechsler convincingly argues "have much to tell us about the exigencies of post-Imagist poetics" (227). Wechsler speaks of "post-Imagist" poetics in this context, as opposed to constructing a correlation to Modernism, in part because of the important changes to visual technologies that had occurred even in the few decades separating the first publications of Imagism and late 1930s Objectivism and photojournalism: "For writers starting out in the thirties, it was impossible to resist the 'strong association between the visual and the factual,'" Wechsler insists (227).

The nature of this "strong association" between the visual and the factual cannot be taken for granted. In *History, Memory, and the Literary Left*, John Lowney connects Rukeyser's work to 1930s documentary art through the theories of William Stott, whose seminal survey *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* cites "exposé quotation, case studies, informant

narratives, and participant observation” as the key techniques of such documentary aesthetic methods (37).<sup>24</sup> Arguing for a similar connection between Rukeyser and the documentary ethos of the 1930s, Michael Thurston speaks of the aesthetic in general as one in which “The ‘portraits’ are allowed to stand as authentic documents, to ‘speak for themselves’ through the pictorial and testimonial codes readers would recognize from the omnipresent documentary culture of the 1930s” (188). There is no assured correlation, however, between the document and the subjects who “speak for themselves.” A point of tension inherent in the question of documentary aesthetics and political agency can be seen in comparing these two critical appraisals: are “testimonial codes” legible to all alike, or primarily to power? What groups are allowed to “speak for themselves” in the genre of a case study, or an informant narrative? Is genre of speech always a negligible consideration when determining “authenticity”?

If the documentary scene of testimony and authenticity tends to be thought in terms of binaries—viewer and viewed, audience and object—it seems that Rukeyser’s approach to these aesthetic practices tended to install a third term within this binary relationship that worked to obstruct and re-route its usual circuits of legibility (and commodification). Chris Green writes of Rukeyser’s collection *U.S. 1* that it embodies a vision of “the relationship between American regionalism, national class conflict, and international fascism.” Green’s list of issues includes not two but three terms, and it is this third term that is essential, as “America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage in Appalachia becomes linked to Europe (and the Soviet Union) through the mutual threat of fascism” (167). This third term functions as the ultimate stakes of the encounter, here, fascism

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<sup>24</sup> see also Stott, 173-89.

being one possible future that threatens the international system, with Communism offering an alternative, yet tacit alternative.<sup>25</sup>

If, as Rowe has written, Rukeyser “calls attention to the textualist conditions of everyday reality,” which include “Union Carbide’s use of medical reports, the media, and ‘official letters’ to cover up the scandal,” then the second valence of this intervention is that Rukeyser, more generally, unveils the “textualist conditions” of democracy itself in the modern age (138). While for the sake of convenience, we still refer to democratic subjects who “speak for themselves,” Rukeyser would remind us that this figure of “speech” is subtended by an enormous *and necessary* network of documentation, inscription, archiving, reporting. Indeed, a functioning democracy (to say nothing of other forms of governance) requires the prosthesis of textuality to create the fiction of free speech, self-representation, and the “hearing” of grievances. Manifesting through technologically enhanced media, this textuality, which can no longer be separated from the survival of democracy, means that democracy itself, having become a textual effect, has become, also a technological one. If the nation-state as imagined community had its origin in the rise of print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson has influentially argued, then the continually evolving imagination of this national community can only be expected to permute with the establishment of different textual technologies.<sup>26</sup>

Rukeyser, then, not only seeks to present the struggle of the workers in the Gauley tunnel: she improvises, through a technologically-influenced and textually-sensitive poetic

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<sup>25</sup> *U.S. 1* itself is a book in three parts, only the first of which is *The Book of the Dead*. Green shows how this plot develops so that the “narrative demonstrates a decisive evolution of involvement: the narrator moves from retrospective witness ... to ideological awakening... to projective participation” (168).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Davidson, writing on Rukeyser in his *Ghostlier Demarcations*, also alludes to Anderson’s assertion of nationhood as an imagined community produced by print culture. Davidson’s reading of the significance of Anderson to Rukeyser takes an interventionist view, where “such overt manipulation of printed documents toward alternative histories would seem a significant intervention in any totalizing view of nationality” (170). I concur with Davidson, but I also am suggesting that the development of different technologies of documentation, archive, and communication *themselves* take part in this shift in national imaginary. Indeed, in this I hold to Anderson’s line of thought, which reads writing technology as a *formal cause* (necessary but not sufficient) of nationhood formation.

apparatus, a model for a new style of democracy in the technological age. When Lowney characterizes the *Book of the Dead* as “engaging its readers in a dialogic process of documenting, interrogating, and revealing the discursive practices by which national history is constructed,” (35) we can add to this reading a technological inflection: Rukeyser comprehends the need to re-think our forms of justice and democratic governance in an age where human life amounts to the cost of the breathing apparatus that would sustain it. Rukeyser is aware that reconceptualizing social justice must participate in technological thought without simply recapitulating its objects.

Rukeyser admonishes the mentality that privileges “the use of the discoveries of science rather than the methods of science,” as she once put it, and by this she urges us never to reify the process of science (*technē*) into the unquestioned artifacts of its methods (technology) (cited in Rich, 44). The work before us lies not in subordinating technology to the will of a purified humanism, nor certainly in technologizing the demos through an instrumentalizing profit logic of de-humanized scientific thought. Instead, we must re-humanize our technology, we must reclaim *technē* as a profoundly *humane* rather than exclusionistically “human” species-endeavor. To try to avoid this struggle to reconceive the relation between democratic collectives and technologies, or to insist on reversing a process of technologization well underway, would be to fail—the work of Rukeyser insists. As Wechsler writes of Rukeyser’s perspective on textual bureaucracy, “[t]o foreground the textuality of public documents is to reveal the textual nature of history as historical record; it is, moreover, to politicize the struggle for the sign” (233). This struggle for the sign has, of course, already been politicized, by those who control it. In the hands of those who would exploit it, however, its politicization has tended to become submerged. The re-politicization of the struggle for the sign which Wechsler sees in Rukeyser parallels the re-humanization of technology’s political allegiances that I see Rukeyser to be suggesting.

Yet, as Chris Green writes, “The year 1938 was a fateful one. The tides of literary history were against Rukeyser and centered upon a conflict about aesthetics versus politics and accessibility.” Citing the failure of the Popular Front, the defeat of Spanish Republican militias, and U.S. entry into the second world war, “not only would regionalism’s prominence fade but so would Rukeyser’s,” Green explains (197).<sup>27</sup> In the New Critical generation’s canon-making annotated bibliography, *Sixty American Poets, 1896-1944*, published in 1945, and edited by Allen Tate, Tate describes her work as “less impressive as a whole than as brilliant fragments,” a diagnosis that perhaps has something to do with his (mis)reading of her generic intentions, calling her “primarily a lyric poet who has inherited the tradition of the thirties.” This attempted synthesis, in Tate’s New Critical opinion, means that “she has written a kind of poetry which is not congenial” (cited in Green, 197). Yet surely Rukeyser would be proud of her “uncongeniality” to the New Critical program. Rukeyser’s work could scarcely mesh with a poetic pedagogy such as that which Cleanth Brooks recommends in his 1947 textbook *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Brooks rails against poetics that confuse and commingle moral judgments with aesthetic judgments, making poetry “the handmaid of religion or philosophy” or a conflation of “the experience of the poem as an aesthetic structure with the author’s experience” (239).

Rukeyser, contrary to the spirit of Brooks’s aesthetic enclosure act, wants to reconnect poetry to a tradition of ethical meditation. Writing, as she said of her Gibbs biography, the books that she herself “needed to read,” she positions her role as an author as a role intertwined with that of the reader. In other words, Rukeyser sees aesthetic production as neither miraclulation nor

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<sup>27</sup> Green also discusses the role of New Criticism in sidelining the politically engaged poetry of Rukeyser: he compares the postwar careers of New Critic Allen Tate to Muriel Rukeyser, to support this point. Both poets published a book of essays on poetry within a year of each other (Allen Tate’s *On the Limits of Poetry* [1948] followed by Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* in 1949. “Few more opposing poetics can be found,” Green comments, and he draws from Tate’s career the shadow-path of Rukeyser’s, who had fallen from political favor: “In his role as consultant for poetry at the Library of Congress (which he had held since 1944 when MacLeish chose him rather than Rukeyser), Tate sought to shape literary landscape” (197).

introspection, neither expression nor assertion: she sees it as a form of socially-constructive dialectics. Rukeyser insists on the aesthetics of experience *and* the experience of aesthetics as socially meaningful acts that co-produce the subject's relation to the social totality: and the modal "ought" of its future.

The "ought" of social totality's future relates to how its technology facilitates the possibilities for self-representation, communication, and production? Davidson believes that "Rukeyser wants to make visible a record that cannot be summarized by a collective 'they' or demonized by a faceless 'enemy'." In this poetics of social cohesion, Davidson envisions that nationhood is constituted by "a scene of writing...in which voices of testimony describe actions usually lost to the historical record" (169). Yet actions "unusually" (i.e., deliberately) lost to the historical record must also be considered. Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* sees itself as a counter-action to the effacements and cover-ups of Union Carbide, for, as Wechsler has observed "what is of importance is the overriding fact, and fate, of invisibility: the invisibility of occupational disease and its ravages, the social invisibility of a mostly black, marginalized labor force that has led to their brutal exploitation and death, as well as their erasure from historical memory" (227-28). The stylistics of writing these victims back *into* history presented a poetic antidote that partially mobilized the means of bureaucratic and legal textual technologies, breaking the aesthetic purity of the lyric I in order to demonstrate the bureaucratic "we" or perhaps "they" that surrounds and determines the possibility of any subjective utterance.

This blending of the lyrical and the textual-technological met with hostility: in a 1943 review of Rukeyser's work, John Malcolm Brinnin writes that although Rukeyser's work approximates that "findings of a good reporter, it is surprising to find, under the name of poetry,



language as barren as statistics.” Brinnin reveals the High Modernist conception of poetry that informs this stylistic assessment:

Since great poetry is that which is drawn from the depths of common myth, its rebirth will depend largely upon the success of men in joining together in a society that is homogeneous, whose fundamentals of belief are available to everyone, and whose aims are the conscious enterprise of every one. Until that state is approached, countless poets will, like Muriel Rukeyser, be driven to heroic, but unwilling, resolution. (575)

Even if this were true, we might ask, what “common myth” can be drawn on to resolve the terms of an industrial disaster like Gauley Bridge? No “homogeneous” society can emerge organically (i.e., without revolution) from a capitalist order that is predicated on the exploitation of large classes of workers who are kept in states of impoverished antagonisms toward each other as competitors for wages. Where then will this “common myth” emerge?

Perhaps the only possible answer to the common coherence of American society at this time (and in the present) could be offered by the technological infrastructure that subtends every transaction and act of production. Cecelia Tichi, writing on the modernist moment of regarding the “machine image” within literature, describes how “the abruptness, the very instantaneous appearance of the technological figures...suggests that the authors have begun to think of it as natural... to move back and forth from the organic to the technological” (34). In *The Book of the Dead*, the back-and-forth movement between the organic and the technological takes place not only through certain images and figures, but also at the level of the poetic apparatus itself—through modes of *poiēsis* that are lyric, epic, but also statistical, documentary. “As Rukeyser flatly states in a companion poem in *U.S. 1*, ‘The poem is the fact’,” Wechsler points out, arguing that “Within the space of the poem, documents are proffered as specimens of language ...to demonstrate that all linguistic *poiesis*...is of material origin and consequence” (231).

Brinnin, in 1943, calls for lyrics that would demonstrate “balance of subjective emotion and

objective record” (567). Yet the status of what a lyrical “record” *is* is not immediately obvious. Brinnin’s statement dutifully echoes T.S. Eliot’s High Modernist battle cry for poetry guided by the Objective Correlative. Yet, given Rukeyser’s perpendicularity to many modernist tenets, we might read her late modernist work as pushing for a more complex taxonomy of the lyrical record, a record beyond the monadic one where the subject records her mirrored self through a motivated description of objective surroundings. This new lyrical record would involve something like a Subjective Correlative—in other words, it would elaborate the formal subject who has been called into being by the objects around her. This subject, being configured and recorded, is always a subject in transition, responding to external events.

Here, Michael Davidson’s concept of modernist technological aesthesis is helpful, namely, the importance of the apparatus as generating “phantasmagoria” for the experiencing subject. Davidson suggests that:

Phantasmagoria, as a master trope for modernism, represents an amalgam of two temporalities: an apparatus that projects private images and a public space in which they may be experienced collectively. It also joins two spheres of materiality: modes of mechanical reproduction (film, photography, sound recording) in which new subjectivities are produced and new public spaces in which these subjectivities are translated into social and ultimately political relations. (4)

Rukeyser, in her late modernist difference to this “master trope,” retains the apparatus, but complicates the directionality of its “projections.” In *The Book of the Dead* we see not an apparatus that projects private images onto public space but an apparatus that projects public images and that represents itself as the limited and “private” (in the sense of private property) perspective of an erstwhile lyric I, here rewritten as the technologically inflected lyric *eye*. The framing device of this poem’s montage of technological equations, lyric elegies, bureaucratic transcripts, and historical documents, replaces the standpoint of a poet with the technological standpoint of a camera.

“Camera at the crossing sees the city / a street of wooden walls and empty windows” writes Rukeyser in the poem “Gauley Bridge,” where she proposes to treat the “history of this condition” of industrial effacement. While *The Book of the Dead* contains poems devoted to the more spectacular and infernal spaces of industry, these poems only occur toward the end of the epic. The first figurations of technology in *The Book of the Dead* are quiet, muted, seemingly non-invasive or neutral, even sidelined: “Railways tracks here and many panes of glass” are only apparent subtly, cropping up between more traditionally lyric description concerning “the grey shine of towns and forests.” There is an image confusion as to where technology starts and nature ceases, so that the town, “April-glass-tinted” is parsed into a myriad of eyes, as opposed to characters, eyes that are impossible to distinguish as creaturely, technological, or metaphorical. We hear of the “eyes of the tourist house,” “harsh night eyes over the beerglass,” while the presence of a boy running, for example, is registered not as perceptually available occurrence, but rather as an action that “blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street” (15-16).

Indeed, it seems that the “standpoint” of technology leads to an interesting twist on lyric figuration. Rather than “anthropomorphism” as a tropic valence of subjectivity, we experience its correlative, what could be called “technologomorphism.” This technologomorphism employs the same centers of focalization and sympathetic reconfiguration of the world into the image of the subject (that which alerts us to the presence of the human speaker in a poem, even if none is specifically given). Thus, we know that the standpoint or lyric center of this poem is to be seen as technological in nature not because this is explicitly declared so much as because the lyric “eye” remakes the natural world through its own image, reconfigures it as technological process. For example, we are given a fragmentary sentence: “Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river /cutting fast and direct into the town” (10). Here, ending with a sentence without a subject,

a reader is forced to speculate on what or whom is telescoped down, emphasizing the technological tenor of the image, a process without a subject. We are also taken through the kinesis of “cutting fast and direct,” an allusion to montage technique, which itself eliminates the syntactical need for a subject, through its screen-writer’s quasi-imperative form of the present-continuous verb “cutting.” *The Book of the Dead*’s opening poem “The Road” is written in second person, prefacing that “These are roads to take when you think of your country/ and interested bring down the maps again.”<sup>28</sup> Yet this familiar You is immediately supplemented, delimited, and even subsumed into a technological mise-en-scène consisting in car, map, statistics, road, and, finally, a camera. The poem’s loose anaphoric seriality of “when you [x]...when you [y]...” transitions into a moment “when you sit at the wheel and your small light chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights— // indicate future of road” (9). A light that “chooses” and a road that has a “future” lead to a closing stanza whose temporality has shifted from the habitual, vernacular-mythic of “when you...” to the temporal deixis of an immediate “now,” at the moment that the camera appears:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,  
surveying the deep country, follows discovery  
viewing on groundglass an inverted image. (10)

The technologomorphic disruption of the vernacular anaphoric time indicates that the “now” of recording history is no longer related to the sense-certainty of the human subject; the power of this “now” as socially relevant deixis has been subsumed by the supplement of the camera.

Walter Kalaidjian astutely emphasizes the metaphoric allusion performed by the groundglass of the camera here: inverting the image of what is seen, the groundglass can evoke certain Marxist conceptions of ideology (74). Of the recurrence of glass imagery in this poem,

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion that links Rukeyser’s use of the second person to photography’s verifiable, eye-witness valence, arguing that for Rukeyser “Photography is linked to ‘extending’ the voice, extending the senses,” see Minot, 272-75.

Kalaidjian concludes that “the glass lens of the camera obscura functions as a metaphoric pharmakon at once to produce and ‘cure’ powers of ideological representation.” He also adds that Rukeyser’s intent “is to return glass to its specific ‘life process’ of industrial production” (75). “Every subsequent reference to glass in the work becomes a symbolic alloy, a polysemous sign” expressive of ideology and class history (76). John Lowney sees Rukeyser’s camera-eye standpoint as not merely framing the documented lives, but rather foregrounds the interplay between photographer and subject, showing “how the camera eye can evoke but not contain the lives it documents” (203). I want to press this formulation further, to assert that, in Rukeyser’s apparatus poetics of the technological standpoint, the lyric eye—that is, the linguistic technology of the poetic tradition, hovering between lyric and epic—is the figural key to revealing how the historical, material realities of the made world that surround us *can contain, but not in themselves evoke*, the lives of whose labor they are a document. To evoke these lives, the apparatus poetics of a technologomorphic eye will be required. Such a lyro-technic eye presents to the reader uncanny images that strike the reader as initially lyrical until, on second thought, the fact of the speaker’s technic affiliations allows us to remember that, before these images are lyrically figural, they are equally, historically, material. For example, we read of the hydroelectric dam and its waterfall of the diverted river, a spectacle of “immense and pouring power, the mist of snow, / the fallen mist, the slope of water, glass” (19). The iconic semiotic that connects glass to water through their phenomenal qualities of similarity appears first as a classically lyrical statement of comparative figuration. Yet, on deeper reflection, an act of reflection that is provoked by the incessant devices of technologomorphic framing, this merely iconic figuration of “glass” and “water” reveals our blindness to material history that the history of figural address has often failed to adjudicate: namely, this water not only looks like glass, it is

the water of the river that flows through the silica-rich tunnel that gives the properties of glass to the lungs of the workers. Silica is the material ingredient of glass. Glass is one material in a longer list of materials that are pouring over the side of this cataract. At a level even more complex, the glass through which we are said to see (the “groundglass” of the poem’s perspectival device) is made of the same material that killed the men whose stories are being unearthed. Our powers of observation are constructed, in this equation, by and through a history that includes that very material violence we witness. This lyro-technic eye of Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* would facilitate a practice of looking backwards from the empty figurality and ideology of present landscapes to see the uncanny and excavatable past of the dead that remains present even as its products remain viable—whether functionally, or as obstruction (the rotting railways of the South). The lyro-technic eye is the perspectival tool the Rukeyser makes use of to look beyond history—history being that which she reveals as a technology of documents, possessed all too often by the victors of history. Instead of histories, we might say, the lyro-technic eye “telescopes down” to the stratifications of *pasts*. The complex relation of these pasts to technologies encompasses the political narrative that is at the heart of this long poem: the story of the expropriation and secularization of the world (here, the “New World”) that transforms its land into property and its inhabitants into either interchangeable parts of machinery, or into human refuse. None of this narrative, Rukeyser shows, can be thought without concerning ourselves with the question of technology.

### Modernization, Secularization, and Technological Frontiers

The struggle between capital and labor figured in *The Book of the Dead* takes place not so much as a recounting at the level of history—entailing, for example, valiant acts against

corruption. Instead, Rukeyser finds an immanent and material vengeance lying dormant but usable within the material and technological artifacts these dead have left behind. In this sense, Rukeyser's prophetic poetry invokes the future as, quite literally, the property of the dead. When Rukeyser chronicles American history, she does so with two histories in mind: one actual, the other spectral. She writes of the colonial age that it is "Told in the histories, / how first ships came... /they conquered... breathed-in America," but at this revolutionary juncture, the interests of greed and private property took over: "See how they took the land, made after-life/ fresh out of exile, planted the pioneer/ base and blockade" (67). Thus, even on the threshold of the new, violent forms of power, base and blockade (reminiscent of pulmonary "blockage"), *made after-life* fresh out of exile, repeated the mistakes of the European history they had fled.

To reconceive the history of the founding of America as a scene in which the pioneers made the country into an *after-life* is, I would say, both a shocking and shockingly apt pronouncement. It seems, moreover, that America becomes an *after-life* in two ways: one, the accumulation of what Marx called the "dead labor" of inorganic capital, encountering "green ripened field, frontier pushed back like river, / controlled and dammed" (67). The second sense of this American after-life is the sense in which I have been tracing the premonition of the dead superimposed on the poem's lyric present. In this after-life, in the realm of the dead who have not yet been properly given their due, in the prophetic after-life of justice that awaits fulfillment, we find the "sums of frontiers/ / and unmade boundaries of acts and poems," unmade boundaries which coexist in an unfinished dialectic with "this fact and this disease."

The language of frontiers and boundaries must persist in this after-life rhetoric of the postsecular utopian because it knows itself to be engaged in a struggle with the secular history of, first and foremost, property relations. If we are to see the day when, in Benjamin's words,

“the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge,” it will be, according to Marxist teleology, the day on which the workers take control of the mode of production. It would seem that Rukeyser is adding a crucial dimension to this drama of property relations and their redistribution, reminding the revolutionary not to forget, in the euphoria of acquisition, the prior lessons of the history of violent dispossession. That is, even at the final moments of *The Book of the Dead*, we are faced with the ever-present danger of history’s repetition. True to a poem whose recurring image of witness is the camera, we are told that “Defense is sight; widen the lens and see/ standing over the land myths of identity, / new signals, processes” (71). And yet this fantasy of total vision limits itself with a conscience born of the memory of vision’s complicity in real histories of appropriation; even in the poem’s final moment of witness and forward motion, we find ourselves journeying “[d]own coasts of taken countries,” and made aware of “fanatic cruel legend at our back and / speeding ahead the red and open west,” not a space of current utopia, but a horizon where the cruelty of the past infects the “desire, field, beginning” of the present (72).

A postsecular critique would need to insist on a re-opening of the question of redemption. However, a postsecular (rather than religious) re-opening of the question of redemption must take place not through the positing of any alien transcendental. Rather, and here we may return to the superimposed premonitory materialisms of Rukeyser, this re-opening of the question of redemption might best take place through a dismissal of notions of the finality and the finitude ascribed to rationalized futures. Trading in alternate futures, this postsecular critique would entail the need for prophecy, but a prophecy of a paradoxical kind: one capable of undoing the damages that have proved endemic to the contractarian-secular future. Because the contractarian-secular relies on a logic of calculable prediction, the postsecular prophetic mode must not simply



replace this calculable prediction with inscrutable, traumatic, or eschatological premonitions. This prophetic mode must foreswear retroactively utopian teleologies; it must avoid the discourses of redemptive future visions as a means to incite present change. The uniqueness of this postsecular critique is that it would begin not from the unredeemed future but *from the unredeemed past*: this is what I have meant when I say that Rukeyser practices a form of prophecy that invokes the future *as the property of the dead*.

Undertaking the work of commemoration, *The Book of the Dead* makes equally explicit the counter-revolutionary powers of memorialization that has been insufficiently worked-through. This is the sort of trouble that obsessed Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Of the “world-historical conjuring up of the dead” that plagues so many revolutions, Marx decries how:

The tradition of all the dead generations weights like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and thing, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. (13)

The danger of commemoration, it seems, lies in the substitution of actual existing realities with the shadows of ghosts, a process that Rukeyser seeks precisely to invert. *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, which ends with Marx fulminating against the French peasantry’s moribund obsession with the Napoleonic ideal, concludes that these substitutive ideals “are only the hallucinations of [the conservative class’s] death struggle, words that are reduced to phrases, spirits reduced to ghosts” (116). Conversely, Rukeyser’s project of commemoration is to supplement the cultural memory of the dead miners of Gauley Bridge with the “image space” of the *actually existing* technological infrastructure—or mode of production—their lives produced. This

supplementation of ghosts with the after-life of actually existing property relations is the revolutionary work—or the “Marxist mysticism”—of Rukeyser’s historical materialist poem.

In fact, Rukeyser superimposes two kinds of history, one in which “half-memories absorb us, and our ritual world/ carries its history in familiar eyes” and “in minds which turn to sleep and memory” (69). This partially amnesiac form of history addresses perhaps the perpetually startled anachronism ascribed to American cultural memory by critics like Van Wyck Brooks through the figure of Rip van Winkle, as the American citizen struggles to “awaken” to the reality of American culture. This blending of sleep with the continuum of history is that which Rukeyser wants to “blast open”, in the Benjaminian sense, to turn history over to the readers of the poem. These readers, as she imagines them, are addressed, Whitmanian fashion, as “You standing over gorges, surveyors and planners, / you workers and hope of countries [...] opening landscapes by grace”; these readers she exhorts by the call, “you men of fact, measure our times again” (70). She speaks, however, not only to these “surveyors and planners” and “men of fact”, but also to and of laborers such as the miners, “drilling their death” out of the rock, of “those touching radium” in the mines, carrying “warning/ glow in their graves,” and of those in industrial textile mills whose “eyes water and rust away,” of farmers starving, all who “meeting avoidable death, fight against madness” and “[a]re known as strikers, soldiers, pioneers,/ fight on all new frontiers” (71). For Rukeyser, it seems, what is sought is a community of address that could reveal to every aspect of labor its true source of strength:

The origin of storms is not in clouds,  
our lightning strikes when the earth rises (65).

Scientifically speaking, Rukeyser is materializing a metaphor of revolution moving from the base to the superstructure by connecting it to the fact that lightning does not “strike” the earth, rather, it emerges when a difference in charge (or the  $\Sigma Q$  from earlier) that exists between the

earth and the charged atmosphere becomes too great. The revolution, then, is an emergent phenomenon from a differential in wealth: an emergent property *of property*. This building difference—in wealth, as in weather—must be overcome by a redistributive meeting between the two worlds. It is in this spirit that Rukeyser writes of the above subjects of a potential revolution, “These are our strength, who strike against history” (70). To call the revolution a “strike against history” returns us to America as the “made after-life” of certain secular forms of property relation.

Rather than dwelling on a vision or a program of what such a world would look like, Rukeyser is more concerned with questions of to whom this future world of restructured relations will belong. Much of the above has answered the question of how the material artifacts of labor must be brought into line with the lived dignity, the mortal reality, and the rightful use of the laborer. In the final section of this article, I would like to take a step back to approach from a different angle the meaning of the presence not of the living but of the dead laborer *as* a ghost, as a temporal entity whose time has withdrawn and yet remains. I want to think through the partially buried history of withdrawal and (dis)possession already circumscribed by and inscribed within the history of “secularization” itself. I want to conclude by considering the quasi-religious artifact that frames this poem, the Egyptian funerary text called The Book of the Dead, in order to show how its intercalation within the poem raises two related questions: the question of the injured body, and the question of the mortal body, both articulated as forms of insurable “property” within the legal framework of this industrial disaster.

## The Tribunal: Documenting the Dead

Returning to Benjamin's Twelfth Thesis, we find an emancipatory promise of an entirely different form of property: the name, or, more precisely, the action that is undertaken *in the name of* the dead. Even in a world of secular dispossession, Benjamin insists that it is "not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself [that] is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of *generations* of the downtrodden" (emphasis mine). Liberation, then is not complete until the dead themselves have been accounted for. While this focus on the dead and their property might be accused, from a certain perspective, of remaining hopelessly mystical, Talal Asad, famous for his genealogization of the "after-life" of the European-secular, writes in an intriguing recent article of a vestige of the quasi-sacred that persists within law to this day and that crops up repeatedly in cultural responses to images of the dead. Asad notes that the dead are treated with a certain measure of "respect"—legally as well as culturally—that cannot quite be accounted for by other secular or contractarian logics: "doesn't the dignity it possesses in the eyes of the living, and the reverence with which it is to be treated, bestow socially on the cadaver a measure of sanctity—and therefore a quasi-"religious" status?" (663). Asad also points out that the non-secular dimensions which persist in our treatment of the dead, also extend in certain ways to the unknowability of the body in pain. Bringing together the topics of pain and the after-life in secular (and not quite secular) legality, Asad reasons that:

For epistemological secularists the living human ends with death. The end is final and there is nothing else. Pain accompanies the dying body. Left to itself the body after death putrefies and eventually disintegrates into its chemical components. And yet the law has long recognized that a person's will extends beyond death, disposing of his or her properties in prearranged ways: the body may be cremated but the personality of the deceased lives on; indeed some aspects of that personality (its intentions regarding property) can be put into effect only after bodily death (662).

Asad, remaining skeptical about the possibility of actually identifying the origin of the secular, nonetheless supports, in a Foucauldian vein, present inquiry into the actuality of the secular—here, with respect to the quasi-sacrality of the injured body, this would mean inquiring “into how [secularity’s] historically shifting grammar identifies ‘the healthy body’ and ‘the body that is sick’ (politically as well as physically)” (673). Asad hypothesizes that the grammar of “the secular” can itself confer—upon an individual body in pain—a role for this pain “in the psychic structure of the political body” (660). Rukeyser, I would argue, can help to trace this “secular grammar” of pain, using this grammar, moreover, to *rethink* the role for the political meaning of pain; Rukeyser tries to redefine the injured body of the worker in ways that transcend the narrower legal limits of this worker’s “secular” incarnation. While the legal fact of the worker’s incarnation is exposed as a set of quantifiable, minimizable values and insurable “risks,” Rukeyser’s portrayal of the scene in which these legal facts manifest themselves contrasts the dehumanizing pettiness of the corporate legal battle with the resilience of the enduring meaning and power of the dead, workers who, even in their death, extend, as we have seen, into the very reality of the physical landscape.

It is here, concerning the legal and political struggles of the workers—and those who survive them, to struggle for justice in their name—that the framing document of the Egyptian Book of the Dead becomes most clearly significant. A facsimile of the “Papyrus of Ani,” first available recension of the Book of the Dead to a large Western audience, was published by the British Museum in 1894, translated by Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge. The following year Budge published an entire Book of the Dead, which offered “the Egyptian Text with interlinear transliteration and translation, a running translation.” Rukeyser, who saw the exhibit of the Book of the Dead in London in 1936, right before journeying to Spain to report on the anti-Fascist

people's Olympiad, had arrived in London having completed her trip to Gauley Bridge to document the conditions there for work on her poem.<sup>29</sup> It would seem that what might have drawn her to connect this completely unrelated, ancient ritual text to the sufferings and deaths she had just witnessed could have been the emphasis of the Egyptian Book of the Dead on spells that ward off future harm in the afterlife—as well as spells that “open the mouth” to speak, and to breathe, two physical connections of particular poignancy with respect to silicosis. Wechsler, one of the few critics of the poem to address the meaning of its framing religious text, connects it to resonances with a feminist mythography: “The Egyptian mythology of the scattered Osiris echoes modernist mythologies of fragmentation and transcendence, but ...it is a triumphant goddess Isis who is speaking here, urging the dead to arise and transform themselves” (239). I agree with this reading, but I think that there is a very specific and as of yet unmentioned historical valence to the way in which these ancient dead, urged to “transform themselves” might have resonated with Rukeyser in the process of creating the poem.

That historical valence is the question of the legal proceedings in and through which the worker's claims could actually be heard. What I would argue is of the greatest significance in Rukeyser's choice of *The Book of the Dead* to frame her poem of an industrial disaster is the fact that, for the ancient Egyptians, the journey into the after-life is inaugurated by the dead soul (ba) appearing before a tribunal. Here, where one's heart (having been removed from the physical body during the process of embalming) is weighed against a feather on the scale of Thoth. Yet the tribunal of the after-life involves not only this factual measuring—one is also expected to make a verbal defense of one's actions, and one can expect to be cross-examined by potentially hostile agents. *The Book of the Dead*, in many senses, a procedural manual to aid in the legal

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<sup>29</sup> As early as 1934 Rukeyser who attended Yaddo thanks to leftist poets Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska is reported to have here sketched out first plans for *U.S. I*, the collection in which *The Book of the Dead* appears, as its first section (Green 2009: 165).

discourse of the after-life; thus, for example, Spell 30b is designed “prevent the owner’s heart from testifying against him at the judgement of the dead” (Taylor, 45). It reads, “O my heart of my mother! O my heart of my different forms! Do not stand up as a witness against me, do not be opposed to me in the tribunal.”

Rukeyser would also have been attracted to the immense performative gravity assigned by the Egyptians to the fact of language and the power of the written word; not only was “[s]peaking prescribed words aloud, in a ritual context” tantamount to “a process of creation” but also, certain spells included in the funerary text were called “*peret em kheru*, literally ‘that which comes forth through the voice’: the act of pronouncing the words itself was believed to call up the food, drink and other goods that were required.” The written hieroglyphs, as an invention of the god Thoth, “were believed to contain great power. Having access to the written word endowed one with the power that those words conveyed. Writing spells on a papyrus roll or coffin transferred the power of the words to that object,” (Taylor, 30) a belief system that might seem exaggerated were we not to remember that our own modern legal *dispositifs* accord similar status to last wills and testaments. The “opening of the mouth” ritual, performed after death, “was to restore the human faculties to the deceased, reuniting the elements of his existence which had been dispersed during the transition phase between death and burial” (Taylor, 100). The soul, after this ritual, could freely journey above ground during the hours of the day, while the preserved body of the mummy stayed below ground. Besides offering preparation for the tribunal of the after-life, the Book of the Dead was a manual to promote haunting.

In his *Politics as a Vocation*, a text that doubles as a brief history of legality and secularization in the west, Max Weber notes that “[t]o an outstanding degree, politics today is in fact conducted in public by means of the spoken or written word”; since it is the case that “[t]o

weigh the effect of the word properly falls within the range of the lawyer's tasks," we should not be surprised by the prevailing legalistic spirit haunting the infrastructure of democracy (19).

While Weber was describing a moment in the history of post-imperial Prussia, his comments still hold true for the context confronting those workers suffering from a work-related injury and seeking redress first from the courts, and then, less successfully, from legalized bureaucracy. Claims against silicosis, in fact, had presented a legal problem for employers years before the Gauley Bridge disaster became known. In the Great Depression, claimants for health damages from silicosis had begun appearing in the common law courts, where the penalties that could be extracted from corporations were potentially quite high. As this trend became apparent to the corporations—and their insurers—corporations suddenly reversed their earlier stance on whether silicosis should be included under claimable damages for worker's compensation. The reason they suddenly bargained to have silicosis put on the list of compensable illnesses was that, owing to factors like a worker's "assumption of risk," the remunerations for silicosis could be kept at a low and manageable level.

Additionally, "A representative of the foundry industry called for the 'establishment of competent and impartial medical tribunals, free from political influences, to decide all medical questions involved in controverted cases,'" since, under the compensation law, the decision had previously been decided by laymen [Rosner and Markowitz, 87-88]. Under the Workmen's Compensation Law, once an occupational disease has been included on the list, the worker is not capable of suing the company in court, and must instead deal exclusively with the company's insurer for retrieval of the damage. Not only does this eliminate many of a corporation's liabilities owing to workplace negligence, this process of paying claims to the workers through insurance rather than through the courts also removed the struggle between capital and labor



from the more public arena of the courts, privatizing and rationalizing this struggle according to the biased interests of the insurer, who would have a vested interest in paying the least possible.<sup>30</sup>

The legal after-life of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, then, is jarringly transposed, in its uncanny correspondence, onto the predicament of workers in a modern capitalist regime of labor and law. As John Carlos Rowe has argued of *The Book of the Dead*, “Rukeyser calls attention to the textualist conditions of everyday reality—Union Carbide’s use of medical reports, the media, and ‘official letters’ to cover up the scandal”; these documents, in Rowe’s reading, work to highlight where “poetry, kinship, law, politics, and science” all intersect, revealing the junctures “at which one discourse requires another” (138, 139).<sup>31</sup> Wechsler explains that Rukeyser’s quest “[t]o foreground the textuality of public documents is to reveal the textual nature of history as historical record; it is, moreover, to politicize the struggle for the sign” (233), and John Lowney sees *The Book of the Dead* as “engaging its readers in a dialogic process of documenting, interrogating, and revealing the discursive practices by which national history is constructed” (35). What remains to be considered is how the struggle over the politicized nature of the sign can interrogate the construction of national history, and how this struggle changes once its public forms of discourse have been privatized. Poetry might here insert itself into the variety of the forms of discursive practices that constitute the (post)secular subject who is increasingly drawn into a privatized capture of neoliberal institutions that have taken the place of the state.

As the subcommittee chairman in Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* notes, “A corporation is a body without a soul.” It seems, too, that this subcommittee, operating under the fiction of

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<sup>30</sup> For a more complete account of this historical crisis, see Rosner and Markowitz, 91-96.

<sup>31</sup> For other discussions of the historical meaning of Rukeyser’s use of “exposé, quotation, case studies, informant narratives, and participant observation” to cite the documentary techniques outlined by William Stott, within a larger context of 1930s political art see Lowney 2006 and Davidson.

democratic justice, is hamstrung, rendered helpless and soulless, unable to conduct a just tribunal to adjudicate the meaningful redemption of these workers' after-life. "*The Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people*" begins the poem, "Praise to the Committee," but it soon becomes clear that this is not the case in an efficacious way: the results of the hearings, in a monetary sense, were abysmally ineffective. "Single black laborers received the least, as low as \$30, whereas the families of deceased whites received the most, as much as \$1600" (Rosner and Markowitz, 98); of the 532 suits filed from the Gauley Bridge disaster, the average settlement was \$245, one settlement being as low as \$21.59. Clearly the prophetic poetics of Rukeyser, invoking the future as the property of the dead, cannot rely on the secular apparatus of corporate-controlled law to achieve its due redemption. Leaving this coming struggle to the future, Rukeyser still insists on the "image space" of the body in pain, and the body of the dead, to disrupt any assured future for the current system of law. At the congressional hearing, she describes how the dead slip in, as a host of eyes, indistinguishable from the eyes of the living; the family of the dead:

...leans out from two worlds of graves—  
here is a room of eyes,  
a single force looks out, reading our life.

Who stands over the river?

...

Who runs through electric wires?  
Who speaks down every road?

Whether or not we participate in the redemption of the future for the dead, Rukeyser informs us that the dead of whom we currently read are themselves, reciprocally, also *reading us*.

Their hands touched mastery; now they  
demand an answer. (23).

## CHAPTER TWO:

### *Deus, Res, Machina: Alien Language, Linguistic Technology, and the Case of the Serial Lyric* in Jack Spicer's Poetry

Writing for the *Village Voice* in 1975, Gilbert Sorrentino, in his essay "Jack Spicer," judges the work of this San Francisco poet ten years after his death—a poet at that time so minor that David Meltzer's 1971 anthology, *San Francisco Poets*, which included Michael McClure, Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Richard Brautigan, Lew Welch, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, did not include the work of Jack Spicer. Acknowledging the almost total obscurity into which Spicer's work had fallen, Sorrentino explains that Spicer's work "is difficult to come at, thorny, flat, not 'beautiful,' and totally lacking in self-confession" (63). Sorrentino's nod to the absent criterion of "self-confession" is intended to interpolate several contemporary and socially valorized factors pertaining to the poetry industry of the time: the ongoing shock-confessionalism that originated with the Beats; allied modes of confessionalism practiced by the political poets of witness and protest active since the 1960s; and, in a divergent sense, the brand of confessionalism sprung from an institutional hybrid of New Critical pedagogy and creative writing workshops that had produced, in Charles Bernstein's words, an "official verse culture" dominated by what Charles Altieri has called the "scenic mode."<sup>32</sup>

That these three camps of such vastly divergent ideologies could have one single methodology more or less in common is one of the more baffling aspects of the literary

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<sup>32</sup> Bernstein's infamous diatribe against "official verse culture" was first delivered at MLA in 1983 to an audience that included Allen Ginsberg. The paper, "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams at the MLA" can be found in *Content's Dream: essays 1975-1983*. For Altieri's analysis of the "scenic mode," in which a quasi-Adornian lyric subject records the experiences of his/her surroundings towards the culmination in illuminating, private epiphany, see *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1986).

landscape of postwar America—although, should this terrain be referred to as “Cold War America” the hidden commonality of “confession” seems rather less arbitrary. What else might the threat of apocalypse (however non-transcendent) be expected to produce but a spate of confession? Seen in this light, we might begin with the question of how this historical moment of rampant “self-confession” appears when seen against a background that promised the utter destruction of (if not *all life*, then at the very least) the archive. As Derrida argues, the apocalyptic framing evoked by global nuclear war has always been the territory of literature. Perhaps the self-confessional compulsion of Cold War poetry emerged as a symptom of the archive’s imminent annihilation: a surge of self-declaration before the end of all things and a desire to aggrandize the recently dwarfed perspective of the individual subject now threatened beyond escape. If Spicer writes “thorny, flat, not ‘beautiful,’” poetry “totally lacking in self-confession,” does this signify nihilistic acceptance of the end of individual worth, or does it demonstrate a different strategy for mining the meaning of technological apocalypse?

Michael Davidson, speculating on how a mindset of interiorized Cold War politics affected New Critics and the poet-practitioners of confessionalism, reads their proclivity for the genre of the lyric not as historically retrograde but, rather, Adornian, in that “by looking at forms of poetry that would seem to eschew the social, we may see an internally distanced view of what the social cannot accommodate” (2004: 54). Yet, a refusal of Confessionalism such as Spicer’s certainly might signal even stronger intention to resist normative paradigms of “what the social cannot accommodate.”

Spicer’s life and work posed for and exposed within dominant cultural conceptions of what it means to be an author. Spicer recognized that “pride” in authorship was a mode of identification of the self with the work, an identification that he rejected (along with the fame

which would be his only posthumously). Spicer continually questioned social scripting which transforms the practice of poetry into a property relation between author and text. What social and historical assumptions about the alienability of utterance underwrite our legal and cultural codification of the “poem” as a possession of the poet? For Spicer, the alienation of utterance (as property) could be transformed by the redoubled alienation of utterance as *possession*—that is, as a being-possessed (by uttering powers, by Language). This rite of possession, supplanting the rights of possessions, ironized both the ownership-model of poetry and the genius-model of poetic inspiration. In scandalizing the ownership-model of poetry, Spicer sought to transform alienated language through the hyperliteralizing figure of Alien Language to restore language to the proper dignity of its social dimension. Passing through the fiction of the demiurgic, Spicer circuitously returns to the powers of the demotic, revealing that the non-singular construction of language is, as Saussure taught, the truth of its cooperative sociality.

Spicer’s serial lyrics are already well-established in critical discourse as working to unsettle the stability of personal cohesion and subjective enclosure within the space of lyric utterance; agreeing with this critical consensus, I will also argue that, beyond this, Spicer’s poetry poses another question or challenge to “what society cannot accommodate,” a question that connects to his training and work as a professional linguist. This question regards cultural conceptions of the role of language itself in the act of cognition, a question that is old as philosophies of mind and theories of language, but that, in this historical moment, had received an update of critical importance: this question was now a question of and for technology. Could a computer be made to think? Could a computer read or “translate” language? Do the signals of our neurons work according to the same informational-theoretical laws as our communications technology? Is language a “program” or a “software” that runs on our neural “hardware” to

produce and translate the biological stratum of cognition into the act of intersubjective expression? How can language itself be thought of as a technology of human thought, and how might this technology be updated, improved, exploited, reprogrammed, or repeated in the workings of the machine? Will the “property relation” of humans to their own language—now on loan to advanced technology—be altered irrevocably by this state of affairs, and, if so, how?

### Property, Poetry, Possession

Spicer famously maintains that his poems are not his own but rather, transmitted through him—while, at the same time, ridiculing any previously existing paradigm of poetic inspiration that could structure our understanding of this claim as one embedded within the literary tradition. Instead, Spicer seems keen to remove the notion of poetic inspiration from the realm of the numinous, the muses, and to hypothesize its reoccurrence within technological apparatus. “I really honestly don’t feel that I own my poems, and I don’t feel proud of them,” Spicer insists. Yet while Spicer was adamant that he did not “own” his poems, he remained cagey about whether or not he truly believed himself to be owned *by* them: was the concept of poetic possession for Spicer a convenient fiction for his experience of “being spoken by language”? In the deconstructed property relation called “possession” that Spicer aspired to through his poetry, three main points of critical inquiry in the last few decades regarding Spicer’s work emerge: the the question of God (or the ghost of God); the status of the “message” as quasi-technological broadcast, through Spicer’s poetics of dictation; and Language itself, which makes a tricephalic appearance in Spicer’s oeuvre as a professional discipline (Spicer worked as a linguist), as a medium (spiritual, mechanic-technological), and finally as a de-anthropomorphizing force that could rechristen the humanist *logos* as the “lowghost” (in Spicer’s words).

To fully grasp the significance of Spicer's deconstruction of poetic "possession" with respect to the emerging technological ecosystem of language technologies, the question of the occult and the spiritual in Spicer's work needs also to be addressed. Critical narratives surrounding the position of God in Spicer's thought generally cite two points of origin: Calvinism and Robert Duncan. Spicer was raised Presbyterian, which meant that his conception of the Judeo-Christian god was inflected by the Calvinistic strain of predestination.<sup>33</sup> If this is to be credited as having influenced Spicer's way of thinking about the transcendental, then we can understand this to mean that for Spicer, "faith" was *fate*, not a form of credulity. Perhaps this can help us to understand why, although Robert Duncan's mediumistic performances of oracular poetics and automatic writing to which Spicer was witness in the late 1940s made a profound impression on Spicer, Spicer himself did not claim to have practiced (or succeeded in practicing) this form of poetry until almost ten years later.

The 1950 publication of Duncan's *Medieval Scenes* are generally cited as the first instances of the postwar trend of "serial poetry," despite Spicer having ultimately becoming the more devoted practitioner and proselytizer of this form. *Medieval Scenes* came into being over the course of ten nightly sessions of automatic writing or "dictation" in the February of 1947, an event that Duncan describes in the book's preface:

it was to exhibit mediumistic powers as well as to reach the voice of an oracle beyond that I performed, sitting myself down to the table...with Spicer and Hugh O'Neill attending the writing. For Spicer *Medieval Scenes* was the initial spectacle of the dictated poem and of the serial poem—by which he meant ... the episodic appearance of a movie serial. For me, it is the immediate appearance of an 'other world'—not here, the Astral World, of departed spirits and divine beings...but the world Spicer and I called Poetry.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Other influences of note come from Spicer's interest in Gnosticism, especially through his readings in Has Jonas's *Gnostic Religion: Message from an Alien God*. Of Spicer's Gnosticism, in the preface to the Grey Fox volume of Spicer's poetry published in 1980 (ed. Donald Allen) Robert Duncan writes: "What he sought in Calvinist and gnostic theologies was an ideogram in which God's betrayal and Man's love would never change but co-exist" (cited in Finkelstein 2010: 101).

<sup>34</sup> Duncan's Preface to *Medieval Scenes*, unpaginated

Even here we can see that, while Duncan and Spicer may have been sharing similar terms (dictation, seriality, poetry), their conceptions of these terms' denotative value were highly divergent. Duncan sees an unfolding truth, Spicer sees a movie serial. Norman Finkelstein argues, however, against delineating any strict separation between Duncan and Spicer; although, as he maintains, Spicer resists styling himself as a poet-source of wisdom, like Duncan did, it remains the case that for Spicer, "the continued act of writing poetry implies a continued awareness of the sacred, a sense that on some level, the poet's relationship to the divine is not only viable but also necessary" (2010: 99).

This "not only viable but also necessary relationship" seems to have been necessary not on the level of faith so much as on the level of poetic methodology: it is the relationship that fosters Spicer's truculent approach to the ever-more unknown. In a preface written for the 1980 volume of Spicer's work, *One Night Stand & Other Poems* (edited by Donald Allen), Robert Duncan opines that "[t]he God who appears in Spicer's poetry is that Creator—the Designer of the Game and of the Rules and of our Winning or Losing—who has projected upon Man...the agony of a sexual compulsion, a poetic compulsion, an alcoholic compulsion, a gaming compulsion, a psychodramatic compulsion that leads him deep into the defeat rooted in his given nature"<sup>35</sup> Yet it is hard to find anything so luridly confessional in Spicer's poetry, and this rather ad hominem description of Spicer's metaphysics says more about the culture of confessionalism and gritty psychological realism in which Spicer's poetry emerged, against the grain, than it does about the wryly reserved, acerbic, painstakingly transgressive poetry that Spicer is now known for.

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<sup>35</sup> cited in Finkelstein 2010, 101.



Similarly, Spicer is at odds with what Charles Altieri calls the “scenic mode” of this period’s dominant verse culture. Altieri’s formulation echoes Adorno’s “On Lyric Poetry and Society” essay, while yet highlighting the lack of any socially salient dialectical process to the “scenic mode,” which presents the space of the poem as the space for the contemplative subject to encounter the immanent meanings of his or her (largely asocial) surroundings through the synthesis of the perceiving ego. This reserves the temporality of epiphany for elaboration within the aesthetic space that lyric offers within the regime of secular modernity. In a literal sense, the temporality of epiphany, in its unveiling of dormant truths upon arriving at some particular telos, draws on temporalities of religious apocalypse. Perhaps, being non-dialectical, this “self-confession” model could instead be called a form or practice of *provisional apocalypse*: one which experiences the uncovering of truth, however quotidian or provisional, without progressing fully through the synthesis of connecting this new truth to the historical world.

This scenic or provisional lyric apocalypse involves an arrest of time or sequence, a transcendent rupture out of profane temporality, where a truth without contingency might be grasped or beheld. Such atemporal or timeless models of closure have been associated with New Critical receptions of modernism. As one of this movement’s American exponents, Yvor Winters, writes in his 1924 *Testament of a Stone*, “The cause of a perfectly fused poem is the fusion of the poet’s consciousness with an object or a group of objects” (2). Here, Winters is indebted to the essays of Eliot collected in *The Sacred Wood* (1921) which Eliot outlines the dangers of a cultural “dissociation of sensibility” and advocates for the “objective correlative.” Echoing Eliot, Winters asserts “the poem can be judged, not in relation to any time or place, nor to any mode of thought, but to itself alone, and as a part of literature” (3). Professing or confessing itself in constructed relation to objects, while transcending these objects’ history, the

poem of fusion, for Winters, “is a stasis in a world of flux and indecision”—a minor apocalypse, a provisional, epiphanic arrest (2).

However, this poetic project of fusion, stasis, and objective arrest changes once it enters into an age bracketed by technological apocalypse as a realized possibility. One might speculate that these New-Critic-approved lyrics of timeless arrest and “scenically” mild epiphanies will have difficulties corresponding to their postwar sociopolitical and technologically delineated horizons. The method from which such poems are said to derive seems to work counter to the larger, genuine suspension of doubt concerning the continuance of history. These forms of poetry may have dominated the scene of “official verse culture” in the postwar period, but they did not totalize it. The poetics under examination here are operating at odds to this inoculation-mode of provisional, personal, and ultimately apolitical epiphany. Spicer’s poetry takes as its goal an achievement of forms of utterance that neither “belong to,” “express,” nor “confess” the poet’s subjectivity. Instead, drawing on intertextuality as a mode, through translation, re-creation of myths, and occasional poems of correspondence and sometimes vitriolic rebuttal, Spicer’s poetics involve the taking-place of the archive not as a settled or scenic tradition but as on-going survival through distorted yet urgent iteration.

If the archive or the essence of literature, as Derrida tells us in “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” has always already been defined by a temporality equivalent to the nuclear, then at the point of apocalypse, at the threshold of the death of the archive, we might glimpse that poems are not mechanisms that, as Winters tells us, exist “to itself alone, and as a part of literature,” nor as “a stasis in a world of flux and indecision.” These mechanisms, instead, are radically unfinished and unfinishable projects, projects that are beyond epiphany, beyond apocalypse. They are an

infinitely fissile, proliferating, serial, citational, generative, uncontainable, yet fragile network of what Derrida refers to as “missives.”

Yet how, on a less philosophical level, did Cold War poetics adjudicate the actual and concrete convergence of its historical, technological realities: not only in its framing by nuclear-apocalyptic technology, but also surrounded by the politics of ideological-military containment, the rise of consumer culture and American prosperity, the construction of global networks of mass communication, and the slow but ineluctable birth of radical politics of emancipation and expression that would define the 1960s of the “first world”? Christopher Nealon, considering the cultural and historical context of the postwar American scene, believes that, within these larger realities, Spicer’s poetry “works as a kind of counterenclosure to the encroachments of mass culture, the culture of business, and the enlarged scale of violence after the world wars” (110). Michael Davidson, reflecting on how a Cold War politics of containment influenced postwar American poetics, narrates the permutations in the previously stable self-defining dichotomy of the modernist avant-garde, in which marginal artistic factions saw their work as a subversion of both mass cultural commodification and the bourgeoisie. Davidson shows that, following World War II, this binary fractures and is re-signified by the emergence of alternative forms of cultural poetics, complicating any division of postwar poetics into neat categories of “marginal” and “mainstream.” That is, while the institutionalized, New Critic-affiliated poets were “marginal” in their elitism, they were mainstream with respect to their production of cultural capital. On the other hand, the Beat poets were marginal in their politics, while remaining remarkably mainstream in their popularity and their self-identification with the vernacular.<sup>36</sup> The competition between these two poetic camps, we might add, took place primarily at the level of *style* on the common ground of subjective utterance, opposing the decorous to the indecorous

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<sup>36</sup> See Davidson 2004: 49-75.

mode. Both nonconformist and formalist, confessional and professional utterances would be subsumed into official verse culture. Spicer, always an included outsider in the “San Francisco Renaissance,” had a conflicted and often combative relation to the poetry machine comprised of East Coast coteries and publishing houses combined with the dissemination of poetic doctrines through the English departments of America’s newly populous universities after the war. By the mid-1960s, despite the fervor of revolution and freedom of personal and political expression in the air, Spicer had become more disconsolate than ever. He seems to have been unable to look away from the on-going imbrication of popular culture, national politics, and even high cultural aesthetics with the “military industrial complex” that had only recently been christened. As he writes in a poem from his late collection, *Book of Magazine Verse* (1965) in which he published poems he had unsuccessfully sent out to contemporary verse periodicals, giving specific acknowledgements for these poems’ rejection (one to Denise Levertov),:

I can’t stand to see them shimmering in the impossible music of  
the Star Spangled Banner. No  
One accepts this system better than poets. Their hurts healed  
for a few dollars.  
Hunt  
The right animals. I can’t. The poetry  
Of the absurd comes through San Francisco television. Directly  
connected with moon-rockets.  
If this is dictation, it is driving  
Me wild. (2008: 423)

Spicer sees the “poetry of the absurd” has now been remanded to technological and military concerns, a changing of hands that Spicer would have particularly mourned, since his early career was most inspired by the pacifist absurdities of the Dada movement. To read this disillusionment of Spicer’s through Davidson’s and Nealon’s analyses can help us to see what Spicer saw: that mainstream v. marginal politics had ceased, in this period, to map the terrain of

aesthetics *primarily because* capitalism's underlying forces had vitiated their structural antagonisms. In other words, cultural capital and consumer capital in this period were being made part and parcel of a unified system—educational, economic, aesthetic—and this cultural system was being articulated to a larger system, the military industrial complex: “Directly / connected with moon-rockets.”

### Outside Incompleteness

Whereas the factions of marginal and mainstream struggle over the contested territory of who will represent the interiority of the subject (the subject of meditation, the subject of radical emancipation), Spicer insisted on the rather unpopular project of representing the outside, or, rather, not representing this outside so much as allowing it to irrupt into the language that dictated the poems. Spicer's apparatus poetics of dictation originate from what Spicer's friend and fellow poet Robin Blaser has called “the practice of the outside.” This signature of Spicer's poetic method allows an openness to the “outside” whose metaphysical status remains unclear. It may be that this outside is as radically outside as the quasars discovered during Spicer's career (and which seem to have inspired him); but it seems equally plausible that this outside is the outside that is *inside* consciousness. Spicer seems to want to insist that we cannot know, in fact, where the outside begins. While this outside-inside is consistently involved with the actions of Language, it is not isomorphic with poetic speech, any more than in Saussurean terms (and Spicer, a professional linguist, would have known this) can *langue* be considered coextensive with *parole*. Instead, the *parole* of the serial poem, as Spicer practices it, comprises the processual method that reveals the profound inaccessibility of the system (*langue*) through any number of its given operational instances. Writing on Robert Creeley's practice of serial poetry,

Leslie Scalapino calls attention to the historical merit or potential of the serial poem: “The form of the Collected can be a being in ‘history’ by virtue of its ground/ the individual poem (i.e., the particular configuration / form of a conflict as a component in a series of such) not mirroring that which is outside. It is to be the opening of a space (that of American ‘doing nothing’) which is what is really outside—i.e., outside of the mind’s continual imposition of the/its own form” (1993: 19). To put this in Saussurean terms of *langue* and *parole*, we might say that the serial poem exists as an aspirational becoming-*langue* of the *parole*.

The non-completeness of language is the hypothesis that the serial poem stages and even celebrates. Language’s (or *langue*’s) non-completeness, importantly, is not synchronic but diachronic—that is, language, as an ever evolving human system, can never reach the end of its set of utterances, since the rules and terms continue to change. Synchronically, however, human *langue* is limited by the horizon of meaning itself. This dis-infinity derives from the system of grammar. In other words, meaning is that which brackets the infinity of language as incomplete. In 1957, Spicer publishes *After Lorca*, his first poetry collection to have been produced, in his estimation, entirely according to the process of dictation.<sup>37</sup> This work consists of part-apocryphal translations and dead-letters (to Lorca) from the author, and the serial nature of the collection experiments with moving back and forth through Lorca’s archive, sometimes in the voice of Lorca, sometimes *as* Lorca (translation), and sometimes as a prose-letter written to Lorca.<sup>38</sup> This collection also contains the first formulations of Spicer’s own apparatus poetics. In final poem, when the spirit-visitation of Lorca has left him, the poet remembers Lorca as “an

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<sup>37</sup> Spicer recounts: “It happened about halfway through when I was writing *After Lorca*, when the letters to Lorca started coming and being dictated and the poems, instead of being translations, were dictated” (1998: 135-36). Spicer was inspired by dictation sessions that he and his friend, poet Robert Duncan, had performed earlier in the decade. For a discussion of Duncan’s own relation to serial poetry and dictation, with odd references to Spicer’s theories, see Johnston, 49-98. I will discuss this methodological influence below with respect to the meaning of its mystical dimensions to Spicer.

<sup>38</sup> Clayton Eschleman helpfully maps out which poems in *After Lorca* are Lorca’s and which are Spicer’s. See Eschleman 1977.

undramatic ghost who occasionally looked through my eyes and whispered to me”—yet this transubstantiation of subject and other is experienced technologically. That is, the experience of possession is recast not as mystical but as mechanical. Spicer’s analogy for this process of dictation-translation is to “Poe’s mechanical chessplayer [who] was not the less a miracle for having a man inside it, and when the man departed, the games it had played were no less beautiful. The analogy is false, of course, but it holds both a promise and a warning for each of us” (2008: 153). Here the poet is the machine, the spirit is the human. But why is the analogy false? Perhaps because the “spirit” is actually the language-system; that same system that puppeted Spicer also, once upon a time, piloted Lorca himself.

1957 also saw the publication of a second book of Spicer’s serial poetry, *Admonitions*, and in this book he outlines a methodology for poetic dictation that has implications also for his theory of translation: speaking of how he and Duncan had discovered the generative secret of serial poetry, Spicer learns from this that “There is really no single poem,” by which he means that the stand-alone lyrics of New Criticism (poems that he famously calls “one-night stands”) cannot be justified as a practice of creative language. He continues, “It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department” (2008: 163). Here, official verse culture makes an appearance as a monetary ideology—the idea that principles of abstract equivalence can render an experience of the subject into an experience in language. It seems that translation, too, would fall under this same critique: translation is not a currency-exchange across national borders. Translation is the on-going haunting of language throughout the diachronic course of human history. As Robin Blaser described Spicer’s spectral translations:

This haunted meaning wanders in and out of the poems. And it is a proposal of the wildness of meaning—a lost and found, a coming and going. It is harsh and beautiful, and as Jack would say, ‘scary.’ It takes the question—who is speaking in the poem?—and changes it into a question of where he is speaking—from what place—in what order—in what composition—a shadowy participant in a folding with something outside himself. (281)

This “shadowy participant” certainly does have ghostly or otherworldly dimensions to it, but here I want to suggest a different structure of haunting: that haunting of the subject by language explored by Spicer’s own *métier*, twentieth-century linguistics.

By uncanny correlation—or perhaps by the powers of the *Zeitgeist*—the year of Spicer’s transition to dictation, serial poetics, and the practice of the “outside” in language, was the same year of the inauguration of the single most important shift in the discipline of linguistics since Wilhelm von Humboldt’s 1836 *Über die Verschiedenheit des Menschlichen Sprachbaues* made language into a tendential mediation between culturalized subjects and their environmentally embedded objects. This shift took place beginning with Noam Chomsky’s 1957 publication of *Syntactic Structures*. “I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements,” writes Chomsky, bringing the question of language here into the question of set theory, a branch of mathematics that had bedeviled formalizable epistemologies in the first half of the twentieth century, up through and beyond Gödel’s 1931 Incompleteness Theorem. “Similarly, the set of ‘sentences’ of some formalized system of mathematics can be considered a language,” Chomsky allows (13). But the implications of Chomsky’s investigations into sets of sentences derive from a crucial difference: while math, like language, has meaning, the meaning of math is not produced through the deep structure (endemic to *langue*) called grammar.

For Chomsky, grammar is not only an innate capacity of human subconscious cognition, it is also “autonomous and independent of meaning.” Yet Chomsky is aware that this



independence from meaning is precisely what has made possible the recent revolutions in information science's statistical models, based on entropy. Thus, Chomsky is careful to clarify that "probabilistic models give no particular insight into some of the basic problems of syntactic structure" (1957: 17). The technological context within which Chomsky's Copernican revolution in linguistics took place is required to understand and appreciate its historical intervention.

At this moment in time, the United States government was exploring funding options for every possible application of its newly invented computer (designed, ultimately, to calculate the untestable first drafts of the atomic and then the thermonuclear bomb). These options included a wholesale reconfiguration of language and translation as signals, messages, noise: operation models for military uses of language.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not Chomsky agrees with the use of mathematical models of language in the service of the U.S. military is not specified, but he does mount a critique of research trajectories thus far, in which finite state languages and Markov processes are being used as conceptual tools to drive language as a series of state-changes through a machine. Chomsky objects: "English is not a finite state language. This is, it is impossible, not just difficult, to construct a device of the type described above...[using] the Markov process conception of language" (1957: 21). Grammar, or grammaticality, is the dimension of language that Chomsky believes cannot be reproduced by a Markov model. Furthermore, for Chomsky, statistical approximation cannot suffice to explain our human understanding of ungrammaticality. Of his proposed method of structural analysis, he asserts that this "cannot be understood as a schematic summary developed by sharpening the blurred edges in the full statistical picture" (1957: 15-17).

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<sup>39</sup> Chomsky, who conducted much of the thinking for this project as a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society (1951-1955), also received funding for this project from private technological concerns such as Eastman Kodak, and especially from governmental sources like the U.S. Army (Signal Corps), the Air Force (Office of Scientific Research, Air Research and Development Command), the Navy, and the National Science Foundation.

While, for Shannon and Weaver,

$$H = -\sum p_i \log p_i$$

where “H” represents information, Chomsky’s work implies that this only brings us to the material or surface dimension of language (comprising its translation into alphabet, bits, sounds, phonemes, etc.) and cannot tell us anything about the true system of language’s operation.

Entropy is involved in the conveyance of language, he agrees, but entropy is not a factor in the way that language generates meaning or propagates sense in the medium, as it were.

Chomsky’s linguistic revolution, a project that begins with *Syntactic Structures*, develops a theoretical opposition within language between deep and surface structures that maps onto the information-theoretical terrain of statistical entropy (message and noise) using the concept of surface structure, but that partitions a preserve of non-statistically determined structure (deep structure) for language in its grammaticality. By the time of his 1966 *Cartesian Linguistics*, Chomsky feels confident that deep structure “constitutes an underlying mental reality—a mental accompaniment to the utterance” (34).<sup>40</sup> But this accompaniment, containing all the linguistic know-how, or perhaps *technē* of linguistic history, is usable without being totalizable, or even comprehensible in anything other than an intuitive way. For Spicer, this Chomskyan deep structure has a parallel in the *beyond* or *outside* of poetry. “The singer and the song are something The Poet did (does) not understand. He had posited something,” Spicer comments in footnote to one of his serial poems (2008: 263). Disjunctively, thanks to the abrupt change in

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<sup>40</sup> “The deep structure that expresses the meaning is common to all languages, so it is claimed, being a simple reflection of the forms of thought. The transformational rules that convert deep to surface structure may differ from language to language.... It is the deep structure underlying the actual utterance, a structure that is purely mental, that conveys the semantic content of the sentence” (1966: 35). In other words: language is not reducible to its materiality, nor can language avoid the translation (or, “transformation”) of its noetically inaccessible structures into surface phenomena. This division also recapitulates, but in an inverse spatiality, the division Saussure posits between synchrony (applicable to Chomsky’s deep structures) and diachrony (which affects the surface structures). The inverse spatiality here as I see it lies in having made the “beyond” of the social tissue of *langue* into an interior and hard-wired yet still universalized (to the species) capacity for grammar.

verb tense from present to past perfect, this third-person deixis seems to shift its locus, as the poet's location changes from being the object of the poem to being the (alienated) subject of its reported speech: "He had posited something."

"We make up a different language for poetry / And for the heart—ungrammatical," writes Spicer, insinuating or conjecturing an addition to Chomsky's Copernican revolution. "It is not that the name of the town changes," writes Spicer here, of the mythic city of Troy: "But that the syntax changes. .... / The order changes. The Trojans / Having no idea of true or false syntax and having no recorded / language / Never knew what hit them" (2008: 390) Here Spicer parodies the linguistic notions ascribed to Sapir and Whorf that the metaphysical lineations of language that are present in its grammatical structure both determine and express a linguistic culture's normative viewpoint. Here, because the Trojans do not have a proper syntax, they are conjectured not to know "what hit them," presumably because that knowledge is preconditioned only by languages that break up syntax into the definability or "truth" of subjects and objects. The further joke is on a paleolinguistics that would infer things about the mindsets of cultures based only on what remains of their "recorded language." The zeugma of this passage (linking "order" of syntax to "order" of political power) shows that Spicer considers these modern-day developments in the science of linguistics to be implicated in the regimes of martial power with which they are co-extensive: the "order changes" in our memory of Troy because its syntactical order is erased (no trace of its language left) and because this erasure is accomplished by history being written from the standpoint of the victors (the Achaeans).

For Spicer, the heart is ungrammatical—and the ghosts of the victors' history are, precisely, unhistorical. These are the ghosts with which Spicer seeks to correspond.

A ghost  
The most

We can say or think about it is it stays.  
Not as a memory of something that happened or a symbol or  
anything  
We loved or respected or was a part of history. (2008: 268)

Is language, then, the language of the victors or the language of ghosts? Chomsky's deep structures would seem to be beyond historical interference, while the surface structures retain the traces of time without any of the *meaning* of that time. Chomsky's surface structures, allied to the information-scientific conception of communication, are epiphenomenal and mere instruments of transmission. At a time when cybernetics and research in artificial intelligence and automata had come to efflorescence, Chomsky's work intervened in this large-scale technological decentering of the subject of consciousness, positing a structure of grammar autochthonous to and definitive of human linguistic capability that could not be simply reduced either to statistics (Shannon / Weaver), to stimulus-response acquisition (B.F. Skinner), nor to computational metaphors of hardware and software (Hilary Putnam). Yet in doing so, Chomsky more or less ontologizes grammar as an inescapable dimension of human *Dasein*. Spicer's reservations as to this embattled ontologization can be seen in his "ungrammatical" outline for human approaches to language, those affectively charged and thereby distorted practices in which poetry may find itself—ungrammatically—involved.

But Spicer's own engagement with poetic pathos is contorted, wry, often atomized by poetic devices into uncanny echoes of what might have otherwise been a *cri du cœur*. For example, a highly enjambed statement might gesture toward apostrophe yet work at performative cross-purposes to the very "reconstitution" it describes: "Oh, no / Reconstituted universe / Is as warm as the heart's blood" (2008: 159). A different occurrence of the "life-blood" makes of this vital commodity a memory for ghosts: in poem called "The Muses Count" we are presented with ghosts who do not grow older, "Remembering every cup of blood they have lived." These ghosts

live in a world after language, a world that interestingly enough resembles the epiphenomenal entropy of information: “There is left a universe of letters and numbers and what I have told you” (2008: 290-91). On this Spicerean effect of passionate attention to atomization, poet Michael McClure has spoken of Spicer’s distinctive “insubstantiality”: “there is an unusual aesthetic effect of disjointure, of there not being a substance there” (125). Spicer himself meditated on this insubstantiality as a predicament of language, writing on the ruse of translation and needing to resist certain beliefs in substantiality: “Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it. [...] Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else” (2008: 122-23). For McClure, this wrestling with language that Spicer constantly enacted was what set him apart from the subject-focused poetics of his day:

An outstanding quality of Spicer’s is that he works in a pale palette. ... He’s not dealing with sensorium: he’s listening. He’s gone through all that agony of waiting for the poem to manifest itself, and then he keeps demanding... But they’re demands not of his own sensorium, they’re demands on something outside of himself. Whereas with Olson’s Projective Verse, there’s the demand that the inspiration do something with his sensorium. (124)

Olson’s Projective Verse, a poetics of breath-measure and a reconnection to purposeful embodiment, can be seen as participating in that anxious recuperation of the “center” of human subjectivity and consciousness that vexes the Cold War lyric.

Spicer’s “practice of the outside,” however, going against the grain of its time, eschews lyrical confessions fusing World and Subjectivity through objective correlatives, to give us a serial poetics that *divests* the poem from structures of completion. The serial poems of Spicer understand themselves as enmeshed within the cultural felicity conditions of poetic utterance, yet they simultaneously forsake (or, are forsaken by) these terms. Their acts of communication are constantly framed by, but misrecognized within, traditional conceptions of lyric

“communication.” Because this divestiture of the poem from completeness does not attempt any transcendence of the poetic tradition, it becomes involved instead in what we might call a poetry of *excommunication*.<sup>41</sup> As Tom Parkinson says of the spirit of Spicer’s *After Lorca* in his review of this collection, Spicer shows that the reason for continuing to write poetry is “the very hopelessness, the tradition of courage and failure and courage, the poetic tradition” (291). This excommunicated subject who continues to communicate operates within a belated temporality, a *Nachträglichkeit*, that, in a Nietzschean sense, *may yet contain the future*. The subject of this excommunicated poetics might be thought of as one who proposes a heretical or unwelcome revision to the future of orthodox practice. Spicer’s unwelcome revision and poetic-epistemological break lay in the theoretical poetic temporality he proposed and practiced. In this temporal framework, communicative continuity only exists in such a way as to further underscore its provisional, fraught, tenuous, and untotizable condition. In a much cited description of Spicer’s break with his earlier, more orthodox poetic methods, Spicer describes the stand-alone lyric poem so beloved of official verse culture as comparable to a “one-night stand.” He declares a decision to leave behind this inconsequential poetic encounter by asserting that “poems can’t live alone, any more than we can.” Yet Spicer’s subsequent serial poems do not “transcend” the one-night stand model of the lyric so much as they prolong it, concatenate it, intensify it, and insist on intimacy’s relation to a fundamental form of repetition-compulsion. In Spicer’s terms, we might say that his serial poems deconstruct the metaphorical opposition casual sex and monogamous intimacy, suggesting that “monogamy” might be nothing other than a *series* of one-night stands.

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<sup>41</sup> As Daniel Katz sees Spicer’s relation to tradition: “‘Tradition’ for Spicer than means a preferably endless multilingual network of continual textual appropriation, reappropriation, and misappropriation, for which ‘translation’ provides one important model.” (2007: 123)

Excommunicated from the hegemonic center of lyric practice, a marginal figure to a relatively marginal “renaissance” (in San Francisco), Spicer persevered, with all the fervor of a heretic who believes in renovation rather than abandonment of a system. Spicer’s poetics of serial excommunication demonstrates that nothing insures completion *or* continuity. Yet although continuity cannot be *caused*, it can still be practiced. Spicer’s poetry illuminates how the *uniqueness* of a textual encounter lies, paradoxically, in the unfinishability of that encounter. Perhaps this unfinishability is the truth of what also is known as: “the tradition”? Of his correspondence with the ghost of Lorca, Spicer says of the task of the translator: “This is how we dead men write to each other” (2008: 134). Spicer opens his poetics to a radical form of incompleteness paradoxically by postulating himself as equally “finished”—as dead as the dead whom he translates forward into the future. An early poem stages this reversibility and ultimate equilibrium of the living and the dead by imagining a coffin being nailed shut from within by the dead inside it, and, hearing that sound, wondering who is nailing in whom: “That’s the trouble with this burial business; it’s hard to know who’s on the inside and who’s on the outside, whether the living bury the dead or that dead bury the living” (2008: 25). In a later poem that speculates on the meta-historical or transtemporal dimension definitive of the poem’s act of communication, “A Poem to the Reader of the Poem,” Spicer takes the trope of invocation to the future reader in earnest, calling on a technological metaphor of a dead telephone line to resignify the speaking “line” of the poem. Contrasting the counterfactual specificity of the poem’s objects with the concrete, future-anterior iteration of the poem’s readership, Spicer compares this tension to “If we had traveled / Mapless, past what either of us knew.../ Past the past that has misplaced us, / Past all the dead lines in a poem that after all / are only dead lines in a poem” (2008: 68). The poetic tragedy that Spicer’s serial lyrics seek to avoid is figured as a technological tragedy of

stasis, fixity, and what Heidegger would call the *Bestand* or the “putting-into-reserve” of all things, even communicative acts. The first section of Spicer’s long poem “Imaginary Elegies” depicts this tension:

I.  
Poetry, almost blind like a camera  
Is alive in sight only for a second. Click,  
Snap goes the eyelid of the eye before movement  
Almost as the word happens.  
[...]  
The temporary tempts poetry  
Tempts photographs, tempts eyes.  
[...]  
Cold poetry  
At the edge of their image.  
It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak only  
Through our own damned trumpets, through our damned medium (2008: 27)

The counter-intuitive simile of being blind *like* a camera forces us to think carefully about what embodied vision actually is, or counts as, beyond the perfect replica of the camera. Embodied vision, or, persistence of vision, involves the paradox of continuity—how to understand that vision’s change even happens? The filmic-technological solution to this problem was (until digital photography) not the achievement of actually recorded change but rather the illusion of movement from the serialization of 24 still photographs per second. As Robert Duncan noted, recounting how he and Spicer both discovered the practice of serial poetry together, through automatic dictation: “the initial spectacle of the dictated poem and of the serial poem...[meant] the episodic appearance of a movie serial,” whereas for Duncan it meant temporary contact with the infinite.<sup>42</sup> Andrew Mossin speaks of the difference between Spicer’s and Duncan’s approaches to dictation as defining a philosophical difference surrounding the potentials and nature of language:

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<sup>42</sup> From Duncan’s preface to his book, *Medieval Scenes*—unpaginated.



For Duncan, language inevitably involves a sense of ‘numinous revelation’ of an ‘immediate event’ that reveals the universal as enacted in the particular....In this dance, language is logos, a source resonant with the godly presence central to all acts of human endeavor. ...In contrast to the immanentist outlook Duncan proposes, Spicer’s and Blaser’s work in poetry suggest a break or fracture, where an articulable self—and language—once stood.<sup>43</sup> (2010: 102)

What then is the difference between a temporary communion with infinity and unfinishably serial communication with the “outside”? The difference that I will investigate with respect to this question is that form of difference between the oracular and the (in)calculable that was at that time being accentuated by certain developments in technology, including within technologies of language—a difference that occurs “almost as the word happens” in our recording of it. This difference calls into question the future of our own “damned medium.”

### Post-Romantic Technology

Returning to Sorrentino’s *Village Voice* review, this review was among the first of the critical re-appraisals of Jack Spicer following his death. It was instigated by the publication of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* in 1975, ten years after Spicer’s untimely death at the age of 40. Spicer had consistently refused to seek publication of his books with any publisher that would distribute them outside Northern California, a paranoiac regionalism that kept Spicer’s reputation limited within his lifetime. Continuing from his observation that Spicer’s work never traffics in self-confession, Sorrentino expands on this poetic form of abstinence, going so far as to launch, on Spicer’s behalf, a jeremiad against contemporary readers who are suffering from what Sorrentino calls a “Romantic hangover.” Sorrentino admonishes readers for perpetuating the idea “that the artist is a kind of dazed egomaniac to whom we look for interpretations of the

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<sup>43</sup> Mossin also quotes from Duncan’s 1964 essay “Towards an Open Universe” in which Duncan describes how poetic inspiration “comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity” (in Mossin 2010: 102). It seems important that language itself has neither identity, place, nor distorting power in this “dancing organization.”

world.” He connects this conception of the poet to a larger cultural tenet, “our belief in the hegemony of the mind as the locus of all reality,” a sloppy idealism that wards off “the pain of realizing that world does not depend on us” (63). Spicer’s work, Sorrentino argues, is an antidote to this rampant egotism.

A Cartesian “hegemony of the mind” in Western culture notwithstanding, it is interesting that Sorrentino ridicules the cultural narcissistic wound caused by “the pain of realizing that world does not depend on us” (humanity?) in a moment modified by the technological conditions of potential apocalypse. In other words, this moment of disillusionment coincides with the moment when what had previously been untrue becomes true: an unforeseen and radical *dependence* or *contingency* of all planetary life upon “us”—upon human political decisions regarding potential nuclear apocalypse. In this historical moment, the future prepared for us by our technology is one which, paradoxically, ironically, we have *prepared* without being prepared *for*. Although humanity has consciously constructed its nuclear weapons, these constructions have, simultaneously, taken human systems of governance “unawares,” constituting the paradox of a deep interdependence surfacing in a narcissistic age of consumerism. This “Romantic” hangover Sorrentino diagnoses may even be a direct effect of the nuclear-apocalyptic age: humanity finally realizes that the world never responded to our private demands nor to our invocations, a secular realization that comes precisely at the moment when, suddenly, and indeed absurdly, *it now does*.

One way in which Spicer is the poet of this post-Romantic “hangover” is that he troubles Romanticism’s genius-model or lyrical possession framework of poetry production, while still

not eliminating it altogether.<sup>44</sup> Indeed the trope of “possession” is vital to how Spicer considers himself a poet. This practice of artistic possession, drawn from the Surrealist practice of dictation claims to be inspired by “celestial” and non-human forces, in good Romantic fashion. And yet for Spicer these forces are decidedly contemporary: Martians, demented radio broadcasts, the Orpheus character of Jean Cocteau, computer punch cards, the alien machine of language, and other less-than-sacred postmodern founts of inspiration. Spicer partakes in this post-Romantic hangover by displacing, rather than annulling, sources of “otherness” as voice; he shifts the source of this otherness onto various figurations drawn from twentieth century technology (its cultural mythology, as well as its reality). It seems that, rather than a revocation of possession by the transcendental, he chooses this post-Romantic displacement in order to de-romanticize the notion of the human mind’s limitless powers once believed (still believed) to manifest themselves through the conquest of nature—most recently, by and through advanced technology.

Spicer reinstalls the human mind within nature, but brackets the question of language/cognition as that which, in the form of poems, exists at a level that is, if not transcendent, then certainly non-autochthonous. In the 1958-1959 sequence *Letters for James Alexander*, Spicer posits:

It is not the monotony of nature but the poems beyond nature that call to each other above the poets’ heads. The heads of poets being a part of nature. It is not for us to make the lines of nature precise. It is for the poems to make the lines of nature precise. Because of their fatal attraction for the lines of nature, for our heads.... The poems above our heads, without tongues are tired of...our attempts to project their silent conversation to an audience. When we give tongue we amplify. We are telephone switchboards deluded into becoming hi-fi sets. The terrible speakers must be allowed silence. They are not speaking to us.... we as their victims, as their mouthpiece, must learn to become complete victims, complete pieces of their mouth.... We are irritable radio sets... but our poems

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<sup>44</sup> Norman Finkelstein sees this paradox elaborated in Spicer’s reliance on possession and dictation: “It seems that Spicer needs to draw on a Romantic notion of inspiration in order to resist what he perceives to be an equally Romantic notion of self-expression” (2003: 88).

write for each other, being full of their own purposes, no doubt more mysterious in their universe than ours in ours.” (2008: 209)

Spicer’s conception of the “otherness” of voice is more radical than even some of his critical proponents give him credit for. Here, the poems of the “terrible speakers” are broadcasting not to humanity, as might apply to a Blakean notion of dictation—rather, the otherness of poetry is a force field “without tongues” that transpires “above our heads.” The technological imagery to which the poet is compared is slightly conflicted, but what is clear is that the Romantic notion of tapping into celestial or transcendent sources in order to project, translate, and convey them to the human world is here reduced to a “delusion.” The poet as a telephone switchboard, rather than the poet as a “hifi set,” compares to an apparatus that brings things into connection, that relays voices without pronouncing or broadcasting them. Daniel Katz, referring to Spicer’s frequent radio metaphors to describe his poetic process, glosses Spicer’s premises, saying “dictation as broadcasting implies not the potential ‘projection’ of the poet’s subjective voice into an ever expanding field, but rather the need for the poet to act as an antenna ‘tuning into’ and adequately reproducing an utterly alien signal” (2007: 121).<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Mayhew similarly insists that Spicer’s radio-poet taking dictation “is not intended to be a metaphor for more conventional notions of poetic inspiration” (115), nor does it represent “a stand-in for the Jungian collective unconscious or a Freudian id; it is not a metaphor for a process of making contact with another part of the mind, or a method of surrealist psychic automatism. Dictation comes from something quite literally outside of the poet’s mind” (116).<sup>46</sup> What even these critics do not seem to want to emphasize is that the poet, for Spicer, only facilitates a conversation: the

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<sup>45</sup> Katz connects this avoidance of self-expression, foundation of the Beat and confessional movements, to Spicer’s methodology of literary translation, which “attacks the conventional authenticity of the poetic experience on every level. If the serial poem assaults the idea of the poem as interpretive object or aesthetic artifact, likewise, Spicer’s extremist version of inspiration in which the poem is ‘dictated’ to the poet by something entirely and magically other and Outside the poet (which he sometimes refers to as ‘ghost’ or ‘Martians’)” (2007: 121).

<sup>46</sup> Hlibchuk 2007 for a discussion of the Orphic radio as a literal reference to number stations and their mysterious messages.

poet, if anything, is an interpreter, rather than a translator. The poet is involved with a conversation between speakers that are unconcerned with the poet.<sup>47</sup>

The poems have their own mysteries, their own purposes. This radical dispossession of the poet's interest or motivation in the act of oracular and/or automatic *poiēsis* is recorded in a telling statement from his contemporary and acquaintance Alan Ginsberg, who recollected in a 1990 interview with Spicer's biographers on the difference of his own poetic processes and premises from those of Spicer:

He was friendly toward me, but held a different vision of poetry. I think he had a thing that has nothing to do with Ego, messages come through the radio stations of the mind, so to speak, whereas I was thinking of the spontaneous mind. Not actually very different in operation: as a practical matter of composition, it's not very different in method. But at any rate I think he thought that my own method was much too involved with personal statement and ego: it's a legitimate objection. The intention of one's attitude, one's training and meditation, I don't think he was particularly interested in. (quoted in Killian / Ellingham: 58)

Distrusting what Ginsberg calls the "spontaneous mind," Spicer wants to insist that the poet should seek to convey the poem without "programming" the poem. This takes on explicit technological meaning for Spicer in reference to how computational science is revolutionizing the uses and programmabilities of language.

Spicer retroactively connects the oracular dictation practice of William Blake to this contemporary dream of programmability, computation (and, presumably, control). For Spicer,

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<sup>47</sup> When Spicer uses a technological device to figure the act of translation, he abandons the radio yet repeats this idea of the "telephone switchboard" (which were still human-operated at this time). In describing the act of translating the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Spicer notes that this poetic labor resulted in the first experience of true poetic dictation for him, despite his having partaken in automatic writing séances much earlier with his friend, poet Robert Duncan. Spicer puts it in this way, in one of his lectures: "I've never gotten any poet but Lorca, which was just a direct connection like on the telephone. Which wasn't the poets of the past but was Mr. Lorca talkin' directly" (1998: 138). It is interesting that Spicer distinguishes "poets of the past" from "Mr. Lorca"—I presume that the significance for Spicer in this distinction was to clear up any notion that this dictation was simply an iteration of T.S. Eliot's Tradition and the Individual Talent. Spicer wants to preserve the idea of the specificity and locality of poetic voices, a fact that influenced his reticence to publish his poetry with any presses that distributed outside his home city of San Francisco. One might say, tying this back to Spicer's unusual philosophy of translation, that he wants to "provincialize" poetic traditions, while, at the same time, allowing for poetry's transhistorical and international circulation.

Blake's problem was the Romantic notion that conversation with the beyond could actually be achieved, that it could actually be conveyed to mankind. In a lecture on "Dictation" given in 1965, Spicer explains how Blake's prophetic dictation leaves him cold:

When Blake really was sure that the angels were speaking to him, they stopped speaking... You get up and then you start these damn things that the angel gobbledygook and the angel so-and-so and so-and-so, and it is the river of light, and the something is shining the something or other. I'm sure I could compose a Blake prophetic book on a computer with a very little bit of programming for the tape. (1998: 35)

Here Spicer's reference to "tape" indicates his awareness of the way that computers—after the Von Neumann architecture and the EDVAC machine—were being programmed. Before magnetic core processing was perfected, magnetic tape was used to record the memory of the computer. The innovation of Von Neumann's EDVAC was that it consolidated both the memory and the program onto the same tape (Random Access Memory). Prior to this, computers had had to be laboriously re-wired, or (even earlier) actually re-soldered, in order to get them to run different programs or algorithmic series. By accusing Blake of writing poetry that would need "very little bit of programming for the tape," Spicer insinuates that Blake's imagery and poetics can be reduced to the recursive enumerability of only a handful of basic operations. This raises the question anew as to what Spicer's infamous radio actually signifies with respect to the function of the poet.<sup>48</sup> The radio receives physical forces (radio waves) from its surroundings, and translates them into analogical signals. If the radio is a radio dish, it can receive radio waves from the edges of the universe, that is, from the beginning of time.

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<sup>48</sup> Spicer's longstanding interest in the folkloric and in folksongs has a biographical connection to his love of radio, which he may have seen as a form of vernacular or folk technology. Spicer ran a radio show in the late 1940s, called "Most Educational Folk-Song Program West of the Pecos" on KPFA Pacifica radio station. An acquaintance relates how "He'd talk about a song, tracing a line from a poem that first appears in say 1500, and then picking it up again in 1900 and comparing the difference." Spicer's biographers note that "After forty weeks KPFA uncereemoniously dropped the show, after listener complaints about the uncensored bawdiness" (Ellingham/ Killian, 30). Stephen Fredman reads this connection as "drawing seemingly 'anonymous' folk elements into a sophisticated assemblage that creates a radical critique by causing the author's voice to dissolve into the act of composition" (2010: 94). The question of the dissolution of the author in the seriality of the mythic will be taken up later in this chapter.

Even more specifically, the type of radio set that Spicer imagined for the poet's double was not the conventional radio set, complete with the newly invented transistor: it was the crystal radio set, the radio set associated with early radio enthusiasts. The crystal radio set is distinct from the transistor radio in that it runs not on a self-contained power source but rather, the *power of the source itself*. The radio waves themselves are what power the device. Although this distinction has not been noted by any of Spicer's critics, it is crucial to understanding the specificity of the poetic theory embedded in this metaphor.<sup>49</sup> Spicer distrusts Romantic ideas of dictation, from Blake to Yeats, for the same reason that he prefers the crystal radio set to the transistor radio (battery-powered): he distrusts the vaguely organicist notion of self-contained power, automatism without otherness. Spicer wants us to replace the wrong-headed notion of, in his words, "the poet being a beautiful machine which manufactured the current for itself, did everything for itself—almost a perpetual motion machine of emotion until the poet's heart broke or it was burned on the beach like Shelley's." This differentiation in power source is what makes a poet like Olson a Neo-Romantic, for Spicer, something that he explains technologically: Olson's projective poetics is "not something from a great galactic distance out there but something you plug in the wall, and it's really the machine which is the converter of the electricity which makes another machine work" (1998: 9). The moment of break with a Romantic tradition of dictation and possession happens when, as Spicer says, "instead there [is] something from the Outside coming in" (1998: 5).

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<sup>49</sup> In the footnote to a poem in Spicer's 1960 collection of serial poetry, *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, Spicer suggests the importance of the crystal radio in contrast to the car radio that he is so fond of evoking, from Cocteau's 1949 film *Orf  e*: "The recalling of Cegeste's voice was done on a horse in one version and on a car radio in the other. Both made it seem natural. A crystal set, in this version of the legend, would not be inappropriate. However there is no crystal set. Cegeste never speaks after he is spoken to" (2008: 266). That Cegeste, an angel minion in the film, "never speaks after he is spoken to" is disqualified from being a crystal radio set indicates that, for Spicer, the continuity and conveyed flow of language is one of the important aspects of this technological figuration. It also speaks to the serial or incomplete, on-going temporality with which Spicer tried to infuse his poetics, as opposed to the creation of a New Critically-approved timeless artifact.

And yet, while this is Spicer's ideal for what it means to listen in on the otherness of language, he realizes that the embodied predicament of the human means that neither the "perpetual motion machine of emotion" nor the crystal radio set are actually possible. He reserves the bodily fragility of the poet to compare to the transistor radio—in a late poem "Sporting Life," he comments on his own lifelong trope for the device of the poet, saying that "The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios / don't develop scar tissue. The tubes burn out, or with a / transistor, which most souls are, the battery or diagram/ burns out." Here, Shelley returns, not as a heart-remainder plucked from the beautiful machine burning on the beach, but through a reference to Shelley's "Defence of Poetry": "The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a / counterpunching radio" who "Takes too many messages" and succumbs from the strain of it (2008: 373-74).<sup>50</sup> But this cessation of bodily viability seems to be also a step in the process of poetry's conveyance, as "after the breath stops, the words listen. To each other?... To something's heart?" (2008: 294). Not to the heart of the beautiful machine—and *not* to *someone's* heart. Having gone through the relay of poetry, the heart ceases to belong to a person. It belongs to the medium, or to an entity undisclosed.

As Michael Davidson summarizes this phase of embodied, material precariousness for Spicer: "The poet is a medium through whom a disinterested message must penetrate, often at some cost to the receiver." This precariousness is the result of the meditative practice in which

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<sup>50</sup> As Davidson summarizes this state of precariousness: "The poet is a medium through whom a disinterested message must penetrate, often at some cost to the receiver." This precariousness is the result of the meditative practice in which "The poet must clear away the intrusive authorial will and allow entrance to an alien and ghostlike language," which Davidson sees as Spicer's alternative to the Beats' "visionary, expressivist poetics" that also verge on the ego-aggrandizing. Instead, Davidson has called attention to the ascetic practice that defines Spicer's poetic production: "Spicer regards poetry as something dictated from an enddistanced 'Other' through the poet, who, through a process of self-emptying, serves as a medium" (1989: 154-55). Because, for Davidson, Spicer "regards the poem not as originating within the individual but as a foreign agent that invades the poet's language and expresses what 'it' wants to say," the cost of this invasion is not fame and fortune—as Ginsberg had garnered—but instead a slow exhaustion (1989: 151). We might perhaps connect this exhaustion to information science's contemporary interest in entropy, as well as its technological discovery of language's innate ability to reduce entropy through redundancy.



“The poet must clear away the intrusive authorial will and allow entrance to an alien and ghostlike language,” which Davidson sees as Spicer’s alternative to the Beats’ “visionary, expressivist poetics” that aggrandize the ego as universal. The crucial difference between Ginsberg and Spicer, one might say, is the difference between universality and impersonality. Because, for Davidson, Spicer “regards the poem not as originating within the individual but as a foreign agent that invades the poet’s language,” the cost of this invasion is not fame and fortune—as that which Ginsberg garnered—but instead a slow exhaustion (1987: 151).<sup>51</sup>

We might perhaps connect this exhaustion to information science’s contemporaneous interest in entropy, as well as its technological discovery of language’s innate ability to reduce entropy through redundancy.<sup>52</sup> In his final collection, *Language* (1963-1965), Spicer parodies the aspirations of this information theoretical approach to communication at a distance, and its facilitation. One poem emphasizes and imitates the ludicrous hope to annihilate spatial distance through electrical communications:

On the tele-phone (distant sound) you sound no distant than  
     if you were talking to me in San Francisco on the telephone  
     or in a bar or in a room. Long  
 Distance calls. They break sound  
 Into electrical impulses and put it back again. Like the long  
     telesexual route to the brain or the even longer teleerotic  
     route to the heart. The numbers dialed badly, the  
     connection faint.  
 [...] The lips  
 Are never quite as far away as when you kiss.  
 An electric system. (2008: 394)

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<sup>51</sup> Spicer held Ginsberg’s fame in contempt, and even turned against his friend Robert Duncan for selling out to the poetry industry of the day. In Spicer’s 1962 book *Golem* we see a famous line of Ginsberg’s reworked to damn the hypocrisy of both these supposedly counter-cultural poets: “I have seen the best poets and baseball players of our / generation caught in the complete and contemptible / whoredom of capitalist society” (361).

<sup>52</sup> “The redundancy of ordinary English... is roughly 50%. This means that when we write English half of what we write is determined by the structure of the language and half is chosen freely” (Shannon/ Weaver, 26)

For Spicer distance is an irreducible facet of intersubjective existence, a product of desire and the impossibility of its fulfillment. “The lips / Are never quite as far away as when you kiss” because of this, but there is also the hint that part of the lack that defines our embodied access to the world has to do with the electromechanical translations that every nerve-impulse is bungling on the way to the brain and back again. Distance is relative, subjective, and cannot be overcome by better instruments, thus, it seems that Spicer’s interlocutor on the telephone is “never quite as far away” as when his voice comes through without the rest of the body. The “teleerotic route to the heart” is not physically but affectively “longer” than the “telesexual route to the brain,” something that no technology can solve. For Spicer, a dimension of the non-instrumentalizable will always remain, and our technologies only accentuate this dimension when they try to foreclose it. This is equally true of language, and Spicer’s comment on language technologies of distance-annihilation in this poem shows up in an omission that is easily read past or “auto-corrected” by the mind’s syntactic expectations: “you sound no distant than” needs the word “more” to be grammatical. Its omission signifies something performative rather than semantic: in a poem declaring that the beloved is coming through loud and clear, there are certain words that are missing, a performance of some noise in the channel. Moreover, the reader does the work of the electric repeater in the relay here, adding the word back in to make the sentence make sense. This poem in praise of technologically mediated closeness performs the effects of distance, only to have the reader re-install or re-mediate this (expected) closeness into the poem. Is information science any different from a technologically advanced form of psychic projection?

Distance is not only an intersubjective precondition, it is, for Spicer, a Gnostic truth of the cosmic-ontological state in a fallen world of creation by withdrawal (the Big Bang, or God): “The / unstable / Universe has distance but not much else” (2008: 393). If linguistic redundancy

provides the spacing that allows for error-low reception of a message through a noisy channel, then distance might, for Spicer, represent the lonely inverse of this fact: the immense spaces of the cosmos signify its instability (having exploded and going on expanding) even while its enormity both underscores and dwarfs the peculiarity of planetary life, not to mention human cognition. Picking up the refrain from the Orphic image of poetry, in which “Going into Hell so many times tears it. Which explains poetry,” this same poem later adds: “Which explains poetry. Distances / Impossible to be measured or walked over” (2008: 384). Redundancy here is meaningful, operative. It orients the reader to the poem-message’s continuing syllogism—in which the distance that cannot be measured not only cannot be traversed by anything other than poetry, but that it also leads to the *jenseits*, to Hell. The universe consist of unstable distances, but only poetry leads out of these unstable distances, into transcendental, otherly-distant, and perhaps infernal realms.

The quantum physical or mathematical reduction of the cosmos to a set of abstract variables informs this eerie “nature poem,” staging the rise of Einstein’s electromagnetic field theories as coterminous with the death of nature:

Distance, Einstein said, goes around in circles. This  
 Is the opposite of a party or a social gathering.  
 It does not give much distance to go on.  
 As  
 In the beaches of California  
 It does not give me much to go on.  
 The tidal swell  
 Particle and wave  
 Wave and particle  
 Distances. (2008: 384)

Is this final word a plural noun or a transitive verb in search of an object? Here, the bare abstractions of wave and particle, final remaining realities of the world, are supplemented not by imagery’s adornment but by overdetermined states embedded in language. “Wave” can signify

both the sine-function of energy and the physical shores of the ocean. “Particle” can signify not only the energetic quantum but also a linguistic unit that modifies lexical meanings—as well as containing an echo to the theme of “distances” in “part-“ (apart, parting, departure). Polysemy, however, is one of the dimensions of language that is non-mathematizable, not at any rate according to information science. Nature, the beaches of California, may not give the post-quantum field theory poet “much to go on,” but language still contains a mysterious ambiguity that is only intensified by the reduction of materiality to particles/waves.

Spicer formulates this predicament in another, and oft cited poem, which contains the statement that “No One listens to poetry,” which is generally read as a confession of Spicer’s despair over poetry’s future relevance to consumer culture. I would like to read this rather differently, pointing out that this “wave and particle” metonym or figure, the Ocean, is also the subject of this poem that explicitly references the terminology of information science. The ocean’s sound is described unconventionally as “white and aimless signals,” insinuating that the ocean now mathematically amounts to nothing but noise, bereft of information. This line contains an interesting line break, however, that signifies two separate meanings: “white and aimless signals. No / One listens to poetry.” Here, the assertion that poetry goes unheard is undercut by the undertow of the line-break, ghosting the assertion with a seeming command of contradiction: “No,” (the poet has changed his mind)—“No, one does indeed listen to poetry.” An even deeper level of ironic signification here is that one has to either listen very hard or read very attentively to pick up the double signification of this breath-caesura: only those who listen to poetry will hear any message *other* than that “no one listens to poetry.” The devices of poetry are used here to create a self-selecting hermeneutic.

This line is also a refrain from the third line of the poem, “No one listens to poetry. The ocean / Does not mean to be listened to” (2008: 373). Here the parataxis of poetry and ocean create the illusion of a syllogism, asserting that poetry, like the ocean, *does not mean to be listened to*. Poetry, like a force of nature, is not addressing us—why do we listen? This quandary goes beyond the chamber drama scenario of Mill’s “poetry is not heard but overheard.” Spicer gives us poetry that originates from sheer and limitless noise, a poet being a creature who listens to what does not mean to be listened to. Again, we can see how Spicer’s radio is the crystal set (capable of picking up quasars) as opposed to the tunable limitations of commercial transistor sets—which can only pick up stations that “mean to be listened to.”<sup>53</sup>

Finally the messages penetrate  
There is a corpse of an image—they penetrate  
The corpse of a radio.  
[...]  
Prayer  
Is exactly that  
The kneeling radio down to the tomb of some saint  
Uselessness sung and danced (the radio dead but alive it can  
                    connect things  
Into sound. Their prayer  
Its only connection. (2008: 376)

The idea of a saint whom “Uselessness sung and danced” (in a wrenched making-transitive of these verbs) is Spicer’s image of the true poet, “hurt into poetry” like Auden’s Yeats, “connected into sound” like a radio. Here we also see that a provisional line of development has been drawn,

<sup>53</sup> Quasars were discovered and appeared in the news during the height of Spicer's short career—and he mentioned them with interest in his final poetry lectures. Quasars are the nondifferentiated luminous centers of galaxies that surround the central black hole. They give off intense radio signals. It must have been a strong form of allegorical affirmation for Spicer to find that at the origin of the forces that form individual stars are radios. Spicer used the quasar as a counter-figure against the idea of a mythic unconscious as the source for poetry: "I think the source is unimportant. . . . an id down in the cortex which you can't reach anyways, which is just as far outside as Mars, or whether it is as far away as those galaxies which seem to be sending radio messages to us with the whole of the galaxy blowing up just to say something to us, which are in the paper all the time now." (1998: 5) Quasars were announced as discovered in 1963. McClure says of Spicer's ability to compose poems by a particular practice of deep attention to the outside: "Jack is not listening for poems; they are actually forced into existence by the hole he makes. It's like Hawking radiation coming into being around black holes" (124).

from the earlier mode of saints and mystical or ecstatic possession to the modern mode of the technological device (the radio) which is more or less literally “possessed” by voices from beyond. Indeed, one sees constantly in Spicer’s poetry that technology is being thought through as an unintended replacement for magical thinking, ek-stasis, and transcendent or incomprehensible powers. This concept of technology sees it as a banalized concretization of magic, routed through the commodity form. Perhaps what Spicer intends is to return the power of the “fetish” to the commodity: that is, to restore to the technological apparatus its ability to fulfill a prophetic history of magical yearnings.

Of course, not all these magical yearnings are beneficent. To return to the question of nuclear war, Spicer might similarly enjoin us to consider the history of magical thinking that such devices turn into reality—the (non)divine utter annihilation of one’s enemies. Spicer’s biographers cite a moment from his early life that brings together an important constellation of forces that shaped his career in its historical moment. On graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, Spicer moved into a house in Berkeley (2018 McKinley St.) where he lived with Philip K. Dick and Philip Lamantia, as well as Robert Curran, a student of Wittgenstein. Thus, science fiction, American surrealism, and philosophical linguistics—all important to the future of Spicer’s work—were represented in one household. At this time, however, Spicer struck his housemates as eccentric and overly disturbed by events in the larger world: “For days on end he would stay in bed, the covers pulled over his head, mumbling that the H-bomb was going to fall, a paranoia built up out of the very real fears created by United States politics of the Cold War,” one housemate reported (Ellingham/ Killian, 21).<sup>54</sup> Spicer’s most explicit meditation

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<sup>54</sup> This recollection was given in an interview toward the end of the century, which can perhaps account for the anachronism of citing the H-bomb in this context. In fact, at the time Spicer moved into 2018 McKinley, the H-bomb had not been invented yet. In 1949, the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb, causing the panic of nuclear

on nuclear weapons as a form of technology would come in 1962, a fateful year for this on-going technological crisis—with the publication of his serial poem based on the grail legends. This collection, *The Holy Grail*, stages a critique not only of the bomb, but also of the mystical politics and mythical obfuscations that make such meaningless violence possible in the first place. *The Holy Grail* is a polemic after the death of God as much as it is a polemic against nuclear war.

God the Planet, Brighter than 1,000 Suns, and the Unwholly spirit

In section 125 of *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche's prophetic madman futilely attempts to convince onlookers in the marketplace that, unbeknownst to themselves, they are the greatest "murderer of murderers. Thwarted, he mutters in an aside:

I have come too early,' he said then; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves. (182)

After the detonation of the first atomic bomb, one might say that humanity enters the era of the fulfillment of Nietzsche's writing that says that the prophet who comes after the Death of God will have his first task in persuading mankind *not* that God is dead (which will require no persuasion), but rather *that it is humanity itself that has killed Him*. Spicer's poetry is a sustained address to this Ghost-God of the nuclear age, and this address makes use of the "Paraclete" of language, the "helper" the "intercessor" of the unholy (un-wholly) Spirit. This spirit, whom the Biblical tradition refers to as "*logos*," Spicer homophonically rechristens "Lowghost."<sup>55</sup> This

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war that is probably what is affecting Spicer in this memory. The proving of the United States' first HBomb at Eniwetok took place in 1952; the Soviet H-bomb was tested in 1953.

<sup>55</sup> Spicer was raised as a Calvinist, and religious allusions suffuse all of his poetry, albeit irreverently. This will be discussed below.

errant Ghost-God appears recurrently and yet ambiguously throughout Spicer's work. It is a God whose motives appear only in passing, with a Doppler-like ambiguity that balances forms of persecution with a mischievous generosity. The death-event of this God proceeds under a Nietzschean temporality of delay, distance, and metalepsis. The Death of God, for Spicer, as for Nietzsche, "still requires time." It is "still wandering"—and yet "they have done it themselves."

Yet the god of Spicer is also god from science fiction; this god who manifests as an extraterrestrial force is beset by the endless wandering confirmed by the Greek etymology of the word for planet (πλανήτης or "wanderer"). This wandering God, whose death-event is still perceived as poised within the to-come, requires not only time, but also poetry. While many critics have dealt with this perplexing issue of spirituality in relation to Spicer's poetry, none have discussed Spicer's version of "God" within the larger context of "the Bomb," or, the threat of nuclear apocalypse. I feel that this dimension to Spicer's "God"—god as a uniquely historical and yet also prophesied death-event—cannot be overlooked. Spicer's conception of apocalyptic time which underwrites his poetics of excommunication also unveils a new temporality for poetry—*seriality*, or the time that resists timeless suspension, closure, epiphany, arrest. God, for Spicer, is this threat of synchrony, the threat of the end of process, evolution, adaptation, and spontaneity.

Yet this figuration of God is also technological, insinuating that the way we imagine divinity is connected to two separate modes or histories—one, the transcendental, and two, the omnipotent. The discourse of divinity has been involved in the history of worldly power as much as it has been involved in perspectives of other-worldiness. In Spicer's work, it seems that Poetry (the *jenseits* of Language) stands as a conjectural substitution for the place of a transcendent entity, leaving "God" as nominal category to denote the realm of omnipotently-aspirant



technologies: the computer, the space-rocket, the bomb. This form of figural ligature—ideas of God being replaced by material realizations of a hidden discourse that had always haunted God as an idea, the idea of limitless power over the world—appears more frequently in Spicer’s work as the Cold War wears on. His close ties to the twentieth century’s most famous science fiction writer (Philip K. Dick) notwithstanding, it seems that the thinly disguised nuclear posturing and ideological contest represented by the space race deeply horrified this poet who had earlier jokingly insisted that “martians” were the muses of his work. In a late poem, he describes the colonization of heaven—near-earth space, and the ionosphere of high-altitude nuclear tests—as projecting onto:

The sky where men weep for men. And above the sky a moon  
or an astronaut smiles on television. Love  
for God or man transformed to distance.  
This is the third heresy. Dante  
Was the first writer of science-fiction. Beatrice  
Shimmering in infinite space. ( 2008: 411 )

Spicer is adamant that our human desires for divine omniscience and omnipotence are not a new phenomenon—only newly achieved. Here Dante is recovered as a 14<sup>th</sup> century Philip K. Dick, and the postulated abstract space of *Paradiso* becomes a place for astronauts *and* Beatrice.

God, for Spicer, is mobilized as a particular sort of apparatus that inclines toward the *phanopoetic* as opposed to the *logopoetic* radio that Spicer is attempting to reconstruct the poet in the image of: “[God] is the photograph of everything at once. The love / That makes the blood run cold” (2008: 49). If the death-event of God now forms the prerequisite of poetry, the force of the poem’s time is wandering deferral, a cycle of descent and empty-handed return, an Orphic time. As Spicer writes: “Going into Hell so much tears it. Which explains poetry.” This Orpheus is a technician (of the lyre, of the poetic radio), not a maker of beautiful artifacts for immemorialization. Every song that Orpheus sung after the loss of Eurydice was, after all, only a

way to pass the time until death reunited them. Spicer also, in a lecture on his method of poetics, explains that to produce the serial poem, the poet has to parallel the injunction Orpheus received having gone into hell: “If you look back, Eurydice doesn’t come up with you out of Hell” (1998: 56). The key to the writing of dictation and serial poems is not to second guess the flow of language, not to disrupt the time of the poem’s unfolding. “A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer,” Spicer also writes (2008: 122). The poet singing (himself) to death, but not to the eternal life of mummification.

In the early poem, “An Apocalypse for Three Voices” Spicer portrays the dead—in what seems to be the Final Judgement—rising from the ocean, but in a strangely technological manner. The dead rise like “records in a great / Electric station”; a voice that seems to belong to God declares of this apocalyptic jukebox machinery, “My great turntable is inevitable; it whirls/ Around, around, a convoluting day / A night of static sleeplessness; it plays / Requested favorites, universal things.” Meanwhile the undead speak, ineffectually, with “flat and tuneless voices.” The imagery is Orphic, apocalyptic, and technologically modern all at once: “The aching chord is broken...Their flat electric voices / Fill the sky” (2008: 11-12).

The idea of the dead rising “like records in a great electric station” is a metaphor with two valences: the physical records that a jukebox might shuffle, but also the idea of records as documents of a past on the threshold of redemption.<sup>56</sup> Spicer worked as a research assistant into linguistic documents from early Native American sources at Berkeley, and he was also an avid member of the transplanted George-Kreis that formed around expatriate Renaissance scholar Ernst Kantorowicz (member of Vienna’s original George-Kreis), so the idea of the forgotten or

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<sup>56</sup> Theorizing the importance of mythic figures and narratives to Spicer’s poetry with respect to the marginality of his sexual orientation as a gay man in McCarthy’s America, Maria Damon has proposed that “Myths of descent to the underworld, aleatory techniques and techniques of dictation, and occult games in which the poets contact spirits becomes prime subject matter and compositional methods for gay poets” (1993: 148). She reads Spicer’s “ghosts” and “martians” as symptoms or indexes of his alienation from a heteronormative culture (1993: 173).

purposefully buried document and its lying on a continuum with mythologization and even immortality was a very deeply engrained concept from Spicer's education.<sup>57</sup> In one of the important sources of his *Holy Grail*, Jessie Weston's 1920 critical mythological study of the content of the grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*, she argues that myths are the nebulous remainders of once-viable social practices and rituals, and that as such they retain "the character of the ritual observances of which they are the survival" (66).<sup>58</sup> Myths, for Weston, are not sublimations or universalizing narratives of explanation so much as they are "detritus"; offering a "fragmentary record" of a once coherent cult, "in the grail romances we possess... the detritus in literary form" (66). The temporality of this detritus, for Spicer, is similarly composted in the human mind as a tissue of counterfactuals, persisting in a poetic defiance of logic:

Mythopoetic creatures flock along the streets of our dreams. They do not mind being monsters. They are casual about the proof of their existence. What does not move does not move has a converse to it—what moves moves. No abstraction known to man and beast can prevent it. (2008: 294)

Parodying the logical language of proofs of god's existence, Spicer associates this tradition with that of riddles from philosophies of mind, such as Russell's unicorn, and the problem of the fabulous creature for empirical accounts of cognition. That "no abstraction can prevent" the perduring detritus of myth to create new incompleteness in the human record is Spicer's answer to the false computability often prescribed to analyses of myth throughout the history of anthropology.

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<sup>57</sup> Kantorowicz, whom Spicer followed in refusing to sign the loyalty oath at Berkeley, next moved to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study (Davidson 2004: 41). While a student, Spicer along with Robin Blaser worked for Professor Roy Harvey Pearce to research the archive of Indian documents in Berkeley's Bancroft Library 1609-1851 (Ellingham/ Killian, 22). See Holt (2011) for a fascinating investigation of Spicer's literary experiments with correspondence in connection to Ernst Kantorowicz's teaching at Berkeley that takes into account Spicer's lecture notes on medieval forms of *ars dictaminis* (letter writing), rhetoric, and politics.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Katz has also found altered passages from Lucy Allen Paton's *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* from 1903 in Spicer's *Holy Grail* sequence (2013: 124-25).

Daniel Katz opposes this Spicerian conception of on-going myth to the modernist version of myth as ordering structure, exemplified, for Katz, by Eliotean mythopoesis. Instead, for Spicer “the mythological hypotext is from the outset proposed as caught up within a network of exchange rather than as grounding or ordering a contemporary futility” (2013: 124).<sup>59</sup> If myth, in the modernist sense, was enlisted to order and reduce the entropic degradation of cultural experience, then Spicer’s late modernist use of myth differs from this earlier conception in that it sees myth, rather than contemporary mass culture, as the detritus.<sup>60</sup> Myth, to become culturally useful again, must be resignified and reworked, it must undergo a *détournement*. In this sense, Spicer’s myths parallel the challenge to the uses and abuses of technology emerging into consciousness in the postwar period.

In *The Holy Grail*, Spicer enacts this *détournement* of mythic detritus by recasting it in technological terms, again confirming a literal, historical link between the magical thinking of the past and its fulfillment in technological modernity. Of Merlin, the magical glass tower (or, hawthorn tree) becomes a radio tower, and this dark ages wizard seems a distant forebear of Nicola Tesla or Thomas Edison, “wizard” of Menlo Park:

The tower he built himself  
From some kind of shell that came from his hide  
He pretended that he was a radio station and listened to  
grail-music...  
...he predicted  
the future of Britain. (2008: 347)

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<sup>59</sup> Katz includes Spicer in his book on Modernist practices of translation because he finds Spicer’s strict regionalism in combination with Spicer’s emphasis on translation as engagement with the larger world to be fundamentally modernist. Katz specifies that Spicer’s work “is not Whitmanian elevation of a poetic quality inherent in all things, nor found poetry, but rather *lost poetry*, continual displacement, the constant pressuring or dispersal of poetry into its other, whether called ‘prose’ ... the ‘world,’ or the ‘real’” (emphasis mine 2007: 121). Katz also claims “for Spicer poetry is less a question of *finding* one’s voice than of letting it be *lost*, just as ‘craft’ consists less in polishing poetic objects than in wrenching language outside of a context which would allow it to be objectified, or reified, into the status of ‘poem’” (2007: 122).

<sup>60</sup> Writing on a serial poem and mini-epic that Jack Spicer devoted to the mass-cultural, vernacular myth of Billy the Kid, Michael Snediker notes, in a similar vein, that “Billy the Kid’s authenticity...springs rather than suffers from the confusions of temporal and spatial displacement” (2009: 244n2).

In a later poem from the Merlin section of *The Holy Grail*, the future of Britain is revealed as a post-nuclear future, and the grail suddenly becomes resignified not as a sacred artifact, but as a deadly technology:

You [Merlin] are called to the phone to predict what will happen to  
Britain...  
...Carefully now will there be a Grail or a Bomb which tears the  
heart out of things? (2008: 349)

This belated revelation of the true nature of the grail works to retroactively unsettle and haunt the sections that came before it, sections that seemed to be offering a mere “modernization” of the grail myth. The gravity of the equivalence between the grail and the bomb, however, turns our experience of (re)reading this myth into a structurally traumatic reading that reopens the question of what the grail even *is*. The grail is removed from its stable place within mythopoetic narrative and allows us to experience, newly, the absurdity underlying the search for the Holy Grail, an absurdity that Spicer believes analogous to Cold War logics of missile gaps and the race for a technology that will end all war through its threat of ultimate violence (parodied by Kubrick as the “doomsday device”). The section focalized through Gwenivere’s perspective especially takes on a new tone: her lament for the absence of her beloved, Lancelot, on a quest that she finds absurd takes on a newly deathly significance in the light of the grail as a sign for planetary apocalypse:

What you don’t understand are depths and shadows  
They grow, Lance, though the sun covers them in a single day.  
Grails here, grails there, grails tomorrow  
A trick of light.  
A trick of light streaming from the cup  
You say, knowing only the unbent rock  
The shells  
That have somehow survived their maker.  
The depths and shadows are beside all of this, somehow  
Returning

Each man to what of him is not bone and skin and mortal  
The moon  
Which is beautiful and shell of the earth  
Streaming. (2008: 343)

That the shell is what remains after having “somehow survived [its] maker” connects creaturely death to the violence of creaturely life. Life appears as that which seems unable to do anything but destroy its own creations. “Shell” is made also to correspond to the shell of Merlin’s hide that creates the tower in which he becomes imprisoned; thus, the shell, as technology, is that which survives humanity.

But there is another figure of excess here besides the survival of shells, namely, the shadow, “somehow / Returning / Each man to what of him is not bone and skin and mortal.” If we are to understand this in a figural way, this would mean that the shadow, returning to a person that person’s physical shape, still reiterates, even in a reproduction of mortal form, the part of a person uninvolved with mortality: here, “shadow” alluded lexically to the ghost or spirit of a person; but also to the material effect of having come between light and the world. Considering, further, that the grail here stands in for the bomb, we must also remember that the concept of the shadow is now associated with the shapes of incinerated humans left on walls in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the “unbent rock” of this poem refers in part to the prehistory of uranium, before it was used for weapons, “bent” by fission to create “light streaming from the cup” of the grail/bomb. Even the beauty of the moonlight, “streaming” here recalls not only the violence of the bomb, but also the historical hypothesis of the moon’s formation to which Spicer here alludes: the moon is the result of a violent separation (perhaps by asteroidal collision) of one quarter of the mass of earth from the time when it was still molten.

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<sup>61</sup> Spicer writes about this historical fact in a later poem, so he may also have been thinking of it here.

This hypothesis for the moon also parallels with the gnostic understanding of the creation of the cosmos as having occurred in the withdrawal and separation of God from the fabric of space-time. This lament of Gwenivere's contains a litany of ever-larger scale fissions and fragmentations naturalized or anaesthetized in culture as "beauty" "holiness" or "power"—a process of mystification that Spicer's anti-nuclear poetics wish to disrupt.

How, beyond merely figural de-mystification, to disrupt this process? Spicer hints that his own processual poetics are an experiment in this work. The "seriality" of poetic dictation alludes to serial forms of memory hypostasized in the computer, and related to the algorithmic structure of computability as outlined by Alan Turing. But is a serial poem designed to do the same thing as a computer program? Spicer's correlation of seriality and computational information processing stages a similarity in method in order to draw attention to the divergence of these two modes—"The grail is the opposite of poetry." What, however, does it mean to be the "opposite" of poetry? Provisionally, this is the computational, though the interesting thing about Spicer's method is that, while the computational is "opposed" to the poetic, the poetic (being a more complex form of signification) can incorporate the computational. Thus, at the beginning of *Holy Grail*, we hear Gawain's nonhuman, quasi-robotic explanation of his place within the quest:

The prize is there at the bottom of the rainbow—follow the  
invisible markings processwise  
I, Gawain, who am no longer human but a legend followed the  
markings  
Did  
More or less what they asked (2008: 334)

Gawain's obedient, mythologically-programmed subjectivity "follow[s] the invisible markings processwise" somewhat reminiscent of a CPU (central processing unit). Recollecting that the "serial" in Spicer's poetry connects to the apparatus of the movie camera before it connects to the apparatus of the computer, we can read Spicer's cinematic form of frame-by-frame serial

movement, as he puts it, “from one room to another, from one frame to another” as superior to that of the expressivist poet who “trusts his own sense of direction rather than the path’s sense of direction”—yet just because “the poem dictating the path to you” must be followed, this does not mean that its “processwise” following of the “invisible marks” is tautologically complete as an operation (1998: 54-56). Following does not mean functioning. Perhaps because Gawain is trying to be a function of some larger program of command, the dry unreality of the logic in Gawain’s section of the poem is particularly pronounced, almost as though his computational perspective is failing to run the operation:<sup>62</sup>

I’m not sure if either of them were human or that what they  
 were looking for could be described as a cup or a poem or  
 why either of them fought  
 They made a loud noise in the forest and the ravens gathered in  
 trees and you were almost sure they were ravens. (2008: 332)

Spicer was familiar with the way that computers of his day (IBM 701, etc) processed information, and his poetry demonstrates the merging of logic, language, and algorithmic operation was a poetic and linguistic as opposed to simply technological moment in his understanding. From his final collection entitled *Language* (1963-65) he rethinks the kabbalistic dimensions of alphabets with the logic gates of computer circuitry in mind, referring to:

Aleph being chosen as the queen of the alphabet because she  
 meant ‘not.’  
 Punched  
 IBM cards follow this custom (2008: 395)

followed by an extension of this image that refers to the practice of the deletion of vowels in Semitic alphabets; Spicer portrays “Two consonants (floating in the sea of some truth together)” as a counter-figure to the serial 1s and 0s of computational processing (2008: 395).

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<sup>62</sup> Spicer also science fictionalizes another character, that of the knight Galahad. In his lecture on writing *The Holy Grail*, Spicer thinks of Galahad as being as “sterilized as a spaceman” in a spaceship (Spicer 1998: 64, 67).



Spicer's Ph.D. in linguistics (never completed owing to his having been forced to leave Berkeley during the loyalty oaths) covered Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon.<sup>63</sup> He was also employed in a project in distributional linguistics, the Linguistic Atlas of the Pacific Coast, that mapped the geographic spread of linguistic idiolects. By the end of his life, Spicer had witnessed firsthand how the philological side of linguistics that had initially attracted him to the discipline had been overrun by mathematical models followed by and in concert with computational ones. In the summer of 1964 through February 1965, Spicer worked in a think tank funded by the Carnegie Corporation at the Institute for Mathematical Studies in the Social Sciences. For this job, Spicer prepared series of lessons in sentential logic for 6th graders that were to be administered through an IBM computer. Killian and Ellingham describe how:

Each student sat at a booth with an image projector, a monitor screen, a light pen, and a pair of earphones and listened to stories, poems, riddles, and language-related 'games,' while response was monitored to accelerate learning. Spicer joined a battery of 'writers, teachers, linguists, mathematicians...computer programmers and computer technicians. (58)

Spicer's one publication in the academic milieu of linguistics was a study that he co-authored with his older colleague David Reed, whose own work had also previously been more philologically and historically inclined.<sup>64</sup> Appearing in 1952, "Correlation Methods of Comparing Idiolects in a Transition Area" proposed shifting idiolect analysis from qualitative to quantitative methods. The qualitative method can describe speech patterns, the authors explain, but to view the distribution of data in "transition areas" (areas where the dialects are changing) they required statistics and quantitative models. Dealing with what they call "micro-units" of

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<sup>63</sup> In a note on the loyalty oaths, Gizzi writes: "In 1949 the oath [for UC employees] was amended to include a patently anti-Communist clause, and beginning in June 1949 all University of California employees were required to sign the new Loyalty Oath... The first few faculty who refused to sign were dismissed in August 1950, among them Ernst Kantorowicz.... After several lawsuits, the new oath was repealed two years later" (Spicer 1998: 169n4). Spicer, who was a teaching assistant at the time, left with MA and taught at University of Minnesota, then returned 1952 to reenter doctoral program.

<sup>64</sup> David W. Reed published *The history of inflectional n in English verbs before 1500* (1950; UC Berkeley Press).

linguistic instances (i.e., the verbal responses of “informants” or experimental subjects) they propose leaving to the side “hypothetical macro-units like entire languages” (Reed/Spicer, 350). One wonders if this professional exposure to instrumentalizing discourses of ignoring the “macro-units” of entire languages might have inspired Spicer to see languages, *in toto*, as increasingly mythic forces, their idiolects turned “detritus.” Such professional experience in the rapidly evolving social science of linguistics can help us to understand a statement such as the following, made by Spicer in his final series of lectures: “The words are counters, and the whole structure of language is essentially a counter. It’s an obstruction to what the poem wants to do” (1998: 30). It seems that part of the deformation that came to Spicer’s understanding of the role and function of language—with language standing in as an antagonist to poetry, to cognition, and to embodied desire—was not an idiosyncratic but rather a scientific one. Spicer’s poetics are informed not only by Surrealism, Gnosticism, post-Romanticism, and (late) Modernism, but also by professional duties such as co-authoring an article to map language which employs:

statistics of the simultaneous variations of multiple variables; this is the  $Q_6$  equation used in a previous study where a= number of elements common to both groups of variates, b=elements present in first but absent from second, c= number absent from first but present in the second, d= absent from both

$$V = \frac{ad - bc}{\sqrt{(a + b)(c + d)(a + c)(b + d)}}$$

(to give more normal distribution, next—

$$Q_6 = \sin \left[ \frac{\pi}{2} \cdot V \right]$$

Spicer’s oft-quoted remark, “I really honestly don’t feel that I own my poems, and I don’t feel proud of them,” (1998: 15) contains within its self-deprecating a deeper criticism, or comprehension, of the transformations that language is undergoing in this period of its instrumentalization, technologization, stochasticization, and algorithmic-translation: language no longer belongs (exclusively, or at all?) to mankind. To claim not to possess one’s poems is to go beyond the idea, here, that “language speaks us,” as post-structuralists since Heidegger have

been fond of asserting. Spicer is acutely aware, in fact, that linguistic usefulness and linguistic production, linguistic data and linguistic processing, are increasingly totalizing the field in which language as such can be thought at all. Moreover, Spicer sees that this dream of perfecting the instrumentality of language and its products has long been with us, only now coming to be realized in something other than magical thinking. Spicer explains, of his *Holy Grail*:

Long before I wrote the poem I read all the Arthurian stuff, and one of the things I was really taken with was in a nineteenth-century guidebook of Glastonbury, that said that in the eighteenth century somebody made a machine there that could write poetry in Latin hexameters. Just arbitrarily, any poem, you know, just like the modern experiments with computers writing poetry. (1998: 68)

But what will be the result of such dreams, in which computers write poetry—will there be just that many more poems? Or will something fundamental have happened to the communicative act of a poem? Even further, has this event, the death-event of Language *as intersubjective and communicative act* already taken place? It seems that our dreams, realized in technologies that speak, write, and think, are already showing this to us. Spicer dedicates the following poem to this dream-scape of agential technology on its way to replacing either God or the human subject:

Mechanically we move  
In God's Universe, Unable to do  
Without the grace or hatred of Him.  
The center of being. Like almost, without grace, a computer  
center. Without His hatred  
A barren world.  
A center of being—not the existence of robots.  
If He wanted to, He could make a machine a Christ, enter it in  
its second person which is You.  
Why he bothered with man is a mystery even Job wondered.  
God becoming human, became a subject for anthropologists,  
history, and all the other wretched itchings of an animal  
that had suddenly (too suddenly?) been given a soul.  
When I look in the eyes and the souls of those of those I love, I  
(in a dark forest between grace and hatred) doubt His  
wisdom.  
*Cur Deus Homo*, was the title of St. Anselm's book. Without  
question marks. ( 2008: 413 )

God, a computer center, has become not an infinite point of departure or prime mover, but rather the heart of a vast calculation in which everything is accounted for. The poem's seemingly misspelled first word forces the reader, ironically, to think in a way that my computer's own spellcheck will not as I type this poem out: what might this misspelling propose to signify instead, through the back-up system of "grammaticality"? A human reader can figure out the connotation of Spicer's neologistic spelling—it implies not "moving as though mechanistically" but rather "moving like a mechanic"—which reminds us of the earlier concept of poet as "time mechanic." *Cur Deus Homo*: without question marks, as Spicer reminds us, removes the force of theodicy from St. Anselm's book title, rendering it explanatory—Why God Became Man. God, becoming Man, becomes "a subject for anthropologists," indicating the ludicrously totalizing reach of the postwar human sciences, as even anthropology jumped on the bandwagon of cybernetics (Bateson, Lévi-Strauss). Yet, Spicer, "in a dark forest between grace and hatred," doubts the wisdom of a god who, according to popular explanations of man's free will, would create such a being, a being "too suddenly" given a soul. "Not the existence of robots" implies that man's existence is (for now?) still involved in the capacity to hate and to praise, to choose and to act. But Spicer, looking into the double refraction of the "souls of those of those I love," has doubts. *Cur Deus Homo* was ostensibly for the sake of mankind's redemption. But it seems that the new question is: *Cur Homo Machina*. And has this event already been achieved (without question marks). For now, Spicer tells us, our best answer to this question lies in the stubborn persistence of our illogical, wayward, un-calculating, and improbable modes (i.e. language):

Pushing wood, they call it when you make automatic moves in  
a chess game or in a poem  
Pushing tar  
The sound, the subway, the skeleton of the whole  
circumstances you and everybody else was born with

The dance (that you do whenever Apollo or any other smaller  
god is not watching you) the dance  
Of probability  
Be-  
ing human. (2008: 222)

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Unresearchable Memory: H.D. and Freud in the Epoch of Machine Translation

*Das ist die wahre Symbolik, wo das Besondere das Allgemeinere repräsentiert, nicht als Traum und Schatten, sondern als lebendig augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen. – Goethe*

[True symbolism resides where the particular represents the universal, not as dream and shadow, but as vital, instantaneous revelation of the un-researchable.<sup>65</sup>]

From 1952 to 1956, H.D. was at work writing her verse epic, *Helen in Egypt*: part invention, part translation. At the very same moment, the United States government was funding a pioneering project in the burgeoning field of computer science: to mechanize the act of linguistic translation. Mechanizing translation contributed to a vast array of advanced technological experiments designed to secure the superiority of “the free world” in the early decades of the Cold War. This machine translation project, spearheaded by information scientist Warren Weaver, evolved within a context in which intensified nuclear proliferation had brought about a demand for rapid, unambiguous, “uncorrupted” translations of intercepted enemy intelligence. While the birth of the computer facilitated experiments with artificial intelligence (cybernetics), artificial memory (computers), and hypothetical electronic architectures for storage and retrieval based on associational logic, the initial purpose for the American computer was to run the vast calculations required for the military’s new and untestable weapons: thermonuclear warheads.

At the inception of computational intelligence we thus find at stake the future of war, the future of human collectivities, not to mention the future of writing, translation, and human

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<sup>65</sup> Goethe, 1985-1996: 775. “Unerforschliche” is commonly translated as “inscrutable,” but here I emphasize its more literal meaning.

language itself. At this historic crossroads, a comparison might be made: between machine and poetic forms of translation. I will approach H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* as an experiment in poetic epic that takes, as its epic subject, an epic *of translation*. This poem's argument resides not in its varied accounts of Helen's fate at Troy but, rather, in its recasting mytho-poetic creation as a different form of origination: a history of translation. Helen is neither the object nor the subject of this epic, as we shall see. Instead, she stands in as translation-effect of transhistoric writing. As Cold War computational technologies gradually gained in public awareness, we might read Helen as a meditation on this epochal shift in technological modernity. Helen, in H.D.'s epic, is neither an analogical "human subject" nor even a narratological "character." She is much better described as a symbolic effect, a structure of signification: as such, she undergoes a quest for consciousness, yet Helen's attempts to attain a synthetic, unified, personal perspective ultimately fail. This epic of translation can therefore also be read as a technological parable: of the pursuit of artificial intelligence.

Whether alphabetic, binary, or hieroglyphic (as we shall see in the case of Freud), when writing seeks to become conscious of itself, it runs up against certain limits. Yet these limits, in turn, are an effect of the structure of the language itself. To transcend these limits, as H.D. would argue, requires an act not of enlightenment but of translation. Reading H.D.'s epic alongside parallel, contemporaneous technological forays into the powers of translation raises the following questions: is a technology of translation *possible*? What are the related implications of technologizing human language? Should human language be thought of as *already* a technology? If so, what is translation?

As H.D. was aware, mechanized cryptography—forerunner to the computer—had been a crucial and even a decisive technological factor in both of the World Wars that she lived through

in Europe. In the early years of the Cold War, cryptanalysts transformed into computer scientists, while the concept of encoding and decoding language for use in the military apparatus went through an equally novel permutation. This language of “code” changed in denotation from “encrypted communication” to include a new form of language that was quite literally *operative*. This language was not a medium hiding a command, it was itself *the performance of the command*. From the computer’s machine-level language of logic gates, to assembly- and high-level, interface languages, the concept of language itself, as well as the concept of translation, was undergoing massive epistemic changes. Meanwhile, with respect to the period’s machine translators, the mathematics guiding this project put language through a process of de jure weaponization, as older conceptions of linguistic translation were conflated with an algorithmic process derived from decryption.

When wartime cryptography merged with research in electronic intelligence, the postwar computer that was created could dissect the statistics of encoded messages (a feat for which its “Bombe” and ENIAC predecessors had been designed). Yet the main impetus for this postwar computer’s construction was to find a way to plot the virtual detonation of thermonuclear devices. The ecological non-testability of these weapons placed them in a class of what we might call “unresearchable” events. Technologies of translation and technologies of unprecedented destruction thus converged at a horizon defined by an entirely new regime of time: here the virtually instantaneous concatenation of events could be parsed only by a race for speed in their calculation. As such technologies developed, the database rendered synchronic a vast amount of information, all while information-processing became incomprehensibly diachronic—how does one “imagine”  $10^{12}$  calculations per second? In this new regime of time as calculation-speed, the



inhuman permanence of computational memory would be outstripped only by the inhuman speed of its recall and manipulation.

Yet, while it was the construction of nuclear weapons that first drove computer engineering toward this outer limit of imaginable time, the genealogy of the “machine mind” has earlier origins. H.D. herself had been preoccupied with the concept of the semantic machine mind and even with figurations of technological translation, decades before Weaver’s team of computer engineers completed their prototype. Indeed, the machine translators also drew on this same genealogical prehistory of machine translation that had interested H.D.: those concepts of mental information processing that crystallized within Freudian psychoanalysis. In what follows, I will trace the seemingly unlikely confluence of H.D., Sigmund Freud, and the Cold War machine translators—as well as their crucial divergence. Using these three different perspectives to examine how language and of translation were conceptualized as structuring the “machine mind,” I will read H.D.’s late modernist epic *Helen in Egypt* for its ghostly conversation with the “machine-translation” of Freud’s mnemic-apparatus. Meditating on how poetics is involved with code, translation, and the history of writing technology, we will see how for H.D., as well as for Freud, these relationships imply a larger theory of language in the age of advanced technology.

#### Freud, H.D., and the Mnemic Apparatus

On December 6, 1896, Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess from Vienna about his labors at redrafting the psychic schematics he had advanced in his 1895 *Project for a Scientific*

*Psychology*:

I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification [Aufeinandererschichtung]: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a ...*re-transcription* [Umschrift].

Thus what is essentially new about my theory is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over [merhfach vorhanden ist] (*SE* I, 233; 1950: 185).

The innovation of Freud's "soul-apparatus" (seelische Apparat) in the time of *The Interpretation of Dreams* was that it could retain memory-traces within a pluralized temporality. A memory-trace (Erinnerungsspur) occupied more than one time; being "several times over," it occupied no particular *place*. Freud insists that the human brain, beset with a plurality of times, is no mere or familiar "anatomical specimen"; its psychic apparatus must not be conceived "in any way anatomically" (1913: 424-5). "Strictly speaking," Freud insists, "there is no need of assuming a real spatial arrangement [wirklich räumlichen Anordnung] of the psychic system." Time, not space, was the illuminating variable: the analyst must note how "the system will be traversed by the excitement in a definite chronological order" (1913: 424-5).

Freud's theory of the "soul-apparatus" evolves through his early career, suggesting at last that the human mind is *not* a coherent subjectivity that unifies an elegantly adapted set of subordinated psychic capabilities. Freud's concept of mind outlines instead a network of systems that overlap, contradict, and obfuscate each other as much as, however awkwardly, they also interlock. This psychic arrangement of systems is not empirically spatial, yet its spatial *figuration* nonetheless provides Freud with a crucial methodological metaphor that also draws on technologies of perception. While the mind was an "apparatus," made of interlocking systems, the actual junctures of articulation between these systems engage not in causally empirical commands but, rather, in modes of correspondence, doubling, and translation. Describing the non-locatability of the "ψ-system" (or, psychic memory), Freud suggests a parallel to the indexical ephemerality of technologically enhanced images: "there are in the microscope and telescope partly fanciful locations or regions in which no tangible portion of the apparatus is located" [*Gegenden, in denen kein greifbarer Bestandteil des Apparats gelegen ist*] (*GW* I: 541-

2; 1913: 425). Freud's analogy between mind and microscope avoids pure mechanicity; his insistence on memory's placeless, temporal multiplicity informs a later apparatus analogy, his 1925 "Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'." Here, Freud refers to the pad as a "materialized piece of the memory apparatus that I carry around otherwise imperceptibly within me" [*materialisiertes Stück des Erinnerungsapparates, den ich sonst unsichtbar in mir trage*] (trans. mine GW XIV: 3). In the apparatus of the mind, memory is an invisible, unlocatable, intangible location that like a star within the telescope, makes visible its "fanciful location" not within the machine but *in correspondence with* the machine. The telescope is trans-lating the celestial.

If this soul-apparatus is really to be conceived of as a machine, then surely the mind's unreliable outputs and unwieldy transmissions might call its machinic efficaciousness into question. Indeed, the mind's soul-machine seems already from its origin consigned to the fate of obsolescence. In the same 1896 letter to Fliess referenced above, Freud adumbrates an updated diagram for his soul-apparatus, complete with neurons for perception "to which consciousness attaches, but which in themselves retain no trace of what happens. For *consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive*." This neuronal plasticity ensures separation between the mind's workings and the mind's memories; crucially, the system of memory-signs is "quite incapable of consciousness." Not only is memory is never conscious, even more radically Freud asserts "the neurones of consciousness would again be perceptual neurones and in themselves without memory" (SE I: 234). Consciousness is infinitely effaceable. Consciousness retains no trace, it is built of the same stuff as perception. Placeless but multiply temporalized memory is required to register in multiple transcriptions (unconsciousness, preconsciousness). Only after multiple transcriptions have been registered—or, translated between systems—does memory become available to our "*thought-consciousness*." At this level of simulacral estrangement, memory is

“linked to the hallucinatory activation of word-presentations.” Memory, that is, has evanesced into translation-effect.

The problem of consciousness haunts Freud with its riddle until, in 1938, at the end of his life, he admits in the *Outline of Psycho-Analysis* that no solution can be found within the discipline he invented. What Freud has found, however, is that by disarticulating memory from consciousness, the “fanciful regions” of memory, inscribed by mind’s apparatus, are thus free from conscious erasure, albeit not from conscious censure. Consciousness without memory, and memory without consciousness: this theory of the machine-mind, or the soul-apparatus, in fact most uncannily anticipates the computational divide that separates operational processing from computational memory. Through the automatic quality ascribed to memory’s *Niederschrift* [inscription], Freud imports the disinterested nature of the machine into the human brain through this automatic quality that he ascribes to memory’s registration. Yet these disinterested layers of perception and memory as transcriptions are intriguingly at odds with that thesis for which Freud became infamous, namely, that the human psyche is obsessively, perversely, aggressively, and libidinally *invested* at every turn. Freud’s psychoanalysis thus teaches us a strange lesson: while a machine-like disinterestedness lies at the heart of psychic interest, this disinterestedness comprises neither neutrality nor reliable testimony. This disinterestedness at the heart of interest comprises not the “virtue” of the mind but, rather, its tragedy. The memory is “there,” *but the memory can never be conscious*. Memory and perception are screened from consciousness by the distorting powers of our libidinally oriented interest *and* by the machinic powers of our semiotically approximate systems of psychic transcription.

As with the mystic writing pad’s device, the psychic architecture of our own experience and memory returns us to ancient forms of writing as etching, writing as in-scription where “a

pointed stylus etches the over-layer, whose indentation reveals the ‘script.’ ...This etching occurs indirectly” (GW XIV: 5).<sup>66</sup> Like these ancient forms of writing, the writing of memory does not simply add itself to the surface: it alters the terrain. Unlike writing, however, memory happens indirectly, unconsciously, automatically. Freud’s concept of the mind as an *indirected* writing machine implies that only obliquely, symbolically, and in-translation do we ever access our own memory. Even further, our present experience itself, transcribed in triplicate before reaching consciousness, is already a copy of a copy. Our lived experience, in its most immediate duration, is already a memory.

“Is this a space of memory or event? Is it a space of desire or death—an active world, or a posthumous world?” asks literary critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis regarding the convoluted narrative temporality structuring H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*. As with the figural spatiality of Freud’s machine-mind transcripts, the integrity of H.D.’s Helen appears equally unlocatable within the textual apparatus of myth. Helen is unlocatable in any “*greifbaren Teil*” [evident / tangible part] of the textual apparatus: “There is a story, a song ‘the harpers will sing forever,’” the narrator repeatedly affirms, and yet this mythic recursivity raises its own questions: “‘who lured the players?’ The players have no choice in the matter of the already-written drama or script” (H.D. 1961: 230). To merge the language of Freud and H.D. as we begin to read this epic poem, we might gather from this framework that, like memory and consciousness, myth and its mobilization are to be considered mutually exclusive systems, interacting only through forms of translation. Between memory and event, this poem can also be read as staging intransigent unlocatability. The book is divided into three sections (Pallinode, Leuké, and Eidolon), but the hermeneutic and narratological progression that we might expect becomes increasingly removed

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<sup>66</sup> “Ein spritzer Stylus ritzt die Oberfläche, deren Vertiefungen die ‘Schrift’ ergeben. Beim Wunderblock geschieht dieses Ritzen *nicht direkt*” [emphasis mine GW XIV: 5].

from our access as readers. Indeed, what is so distinctive about this epic poem is that it is Helen who undergoes not only the event of the plot but also the attempt to *read* the plot. Moreover, as she reads the plot *as* plot, her subjectivity as a character becomes more and more cryptic to us. The three sections correspond roughly to three different Helens, the first who tries to come to terms with the memory of writing that she is, the second who retreats from the world to study a mystic script whose ciphers only she can read, the third and final Helen, “numb with memory,” who abandons the project of stable hermeneutics to seek some transcendent perspective on herself as an actor: this project, in the end, is left in limbo. The overall progress of *Helen in Egypt* might then be said to be a structural evasion of transcendence. This poem dwells not on the unification or final “truth” of Helen’s story but, rather, on the fundamental indeterminacy that Helen glimpses at the level of *telos* or final cause *and at the level of origin*.

Helen, whose existence as a mythic palimpsest continues to in present imagination, is a textual phenomenon, a cultural algorithm, its recursions infinite and its origins unknown.

Was Troy lost for a kiss,  
or a run of notes on a lyre?  
was the lyre-frame stronger  
  
than the bowman’s arc,  
the chord tauter?  
was it a challenge to Death,  
  
to all song forever?  
was it a question asked  
to which there was no answer?  
  
was it Paris? was it Apollo?  
was it a game played over and over,  
with numbers or counters? (230)

This passage, taken from the book’s final section, “Eidolon,” constructs a strange set of contrasts. Here the *telos* of romantic love (“lost for a kiss”) is opposed to the *telos* of an aesthetic occasion (“a run of notes on a lyre”). The instruments of war are opposed to the instruments of

music (“bowman’s arc” to “lyre-frame”). While each of these oppositions has its literary precedent, one opposition stands out as anomalous: the gods and heroes are here opposed to a mathematical, impersonal, computational force, “a game played over and over, / with numbers or counters.” This opposition contains uncertainty whether any agential force stands behind the repetition-compulsions and recursive curses of history. Without divine history, it seems, we have history as “game theory.” As it happens, Cold War politics at the time was very much committed to a notion of history as “game-theory,” blithely running the numbers on the statistical risks of political interventions while balancing *realpolitik* against factors of “megadeath.”<sup>67</sup>

This lyric’s computational alternative to divinities also accentuates the *instrumental* nature of another term in the sequence of alternatives: that of the lyre. The “lyre-frame” with its chords and its “run of notes,” which might otherwise stand as cultural synecdoche, here is newly cast as being mathematical, technological. This lyre recalls not only the songs of poets but also the history of the lyre’s having inspired Pythagorean geometry. H.D. here excavates a forgotten computational history from the lyre-frame, symbol of poetry. Although “the lyric” denotes a genre of poetic *utterance*, its name in fact contains a displacement of the notion of human “voice”: a displacement onto the accompanying instrument. Technology’s integral accompaniment has been effaced, becoming metonym for song. In *Helen in Egypt*, the disavowed relations between technology and subject, computation and cognition, lyre and lyric, are brought back into question by means of another set of overdetermined concepts: script, code, encryption; writing, memory, translation. These figures of inscription are placed midway between mathematical computation and historical narration. Narrative- historical time here constitutes an opposite pole to the computational realm of myth “out of time or beyond moon-

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<sup>67</sup> “Mutually Assured Destruction” is one of the more famous manifestations of game-theory in Cold War political decision-making. For a history of this development see Leonard 2010.

time,” a celestial machine of “time with its widening star-circles, / time as small as a pebble, // *with bones or stones for counters*” (200). Amid these telescoping temporal alternatives,

There was always another and another and another,  
shall we match them like knuckle-players  
with bones or stones for counters,

the fatality of numbers?  
the first? the last?  
and of the many, many in-between,

importunate, breath-taking encounters  
with those half-seen... (162)

The many “half-seen” apparitions that haunt this book’s topography of dream-work and myth are all engaged in forms of repetition, “another and another and another.” Yet what is distinctive about this form of repetition is that, as a “fatality of numbers” it *contradicts typology*. H.D. desires to dismantle the historical usefulness of myth for national politics, an intent that can be traced throughout her work. In *Helen in Egypt* in particular, this dismantling of myth proceeds by revealing the matheme beneath the mytheme—the computational power to instruct through modes of repetition. Yet this mathematics of myth can never totalize or enclose the power of newness, which, in the passage above, emerges in the breath-taking moments when “counters” give way to “encounters.” Bringing together a mathematical frame with the dynamics of the unknown, we might read: “n-counters.”

The figure, or the matheme, of Helen in this epic can be seen as suffering under her own eternity. In one of the prose interludes (signaled by italics), the impersonal narrator pronounces that “*There is no question of Helen’s integrity....There is a story, a song ‘the harpers will sing forever’*,” which suggests that to pursue the reality of Helen as a historic figure is to go hopelessly astray. Such readings misrecognize Helen’s fundamentally textual nature as a though it were the representation of an original subject. In H.D.’s epic, Helen not a person, she is a



textual effect. Even more complexly still, Helen herself undergoes this same process of misrecognition. Searching for her own origins, her own original fate and desires within the historiographic ruins of myth, we see that Helen's progress through this book presents itself both as an anamnesis and an anabasis. Her journey into the time-immemorial interior of history appears ever more as a sojourn within overdetermined, remaindered terrain of textuality. As we follow Helen's coming-to-consciousness of herself as textual effect, we gauge this trajectory through the changes in voice that occur within the first-person lyrics attributed to her viewpoint. Thus, the form of the lyric itself—traditionally conceived as a representation of subjective interiority—becomes implicated in this transformation from subject to textual effect. At the book's conclusion, Helen discovers no a unified self nor a subjective truth. She finds that the truth of her Self is Text: "she herself is the writing," as the book's refrain puts it.<sup>68</sup>

Many critics have noted the conversation with Freud that takes place in this epic, while reading this dialogue as recording a struggle for gendered and sexual self-definition taking place between H.D.'s poetry and Freud's methodology.<sup>69</sup> Yet the critics who read *Helen in Egypt* in this way are confronted with a problem: what to do with the ending of the book, in which Helen relinquishes her struggle for coherent self-construction?<sup>70</sup> The Helen of the epic's third section "*numb with a memory*," abandons hermeneutics for the synchronic drift of apparitionality (as

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<sup>68</sup> Many critics, especially those writing from within the perspective of feminist critique, read this refrain as H.D.'s critique of patriarchal norms that script and conscript female subjects into gender (i.e., women situated as the object of history, never the subject). See Ostriker 1986; Friedman 1981:254- 272; Korg 1995: 150; Hogue 1995: 127-57; Collecott 1999: 146-7; on H.D.'s praxis of translation as resisting modernist patriarchal norms, see Yao, 79-114; for a post-colonial reading of this subject-constitution, see Tabron, esp. 104-107; Duplessis resists the lure of subjective coherence in reading this epic, but pursues a paradigm of unity through a Kristevan reading turned toward unified matriarchal power 1986: 113- 14. For a reading of subjective coherence gained at the expense of the matriarchal, see Kloepper 1989. A critique of "gyno-centric" readings of H.D. can be found in Rado, 60-98. I do not seek to replace these important readings, yet I should like to open a space in which to propose an alternative framework for reading this refrain, as well as an alternative conception of this epic's intervention into cultural history. My reading of *Helen in Egypt* would emphasize H.D.'s response to technological modernity so as to illuminate the challenges this moment in history posed to textual traditions.

<sup>69</sup> See Friedman 1981, 59-61; Chisholm 1992: 165-213; Buck 1991: 98-130; Edmunds 1994; Johnston 2007: 106-13.

<sup>70</sup> See Edmunds 1994: 130; Buck 1991: 146-64; Wasserman, 171.

eidolon). She describes how “My mind goes on, / spinning the infinite thread” but without hope of finding transcendent meaning: “why do I lie here and wonder, / and try to unravel the tangle // that no man can ever un-knot?” (298). Helen’s peculiar anomie by the end of the book proclaims a recursive undoing to the path she has traveled in search of original truth:

So it was nothing, nothing at all,  
the first words he seemed to speak  
in my fever, awake or asleep;

it was nothing, the corridors,  
the temple, the temple walls,  
the tasks of the star-beasts,

the words I had spoken before  
to Theseus, and my prayer;  
it was nothing, the Amen-script,

the Writing, the star-space.... (258)

To accept that the entire architecture of this epic—psychic, geographical, historical—is “nothing, nothing at all” is difficult to do that architecture had been read as promising the foundation for a new political synthesis of the mythic past. Those who read Helen’s journey through remaindered mythic texts and temporalities as constituting an emancipatory or recuperative political project for female identity can only despair of H.D.’s final and thorough effacement of this journey, concluding that she has betrayed her own initially revolutionary impulses.

Yet perhaps these readings of H.D.’s Helen are involved in the very same misrecognition that Helen herself undergoes: the misrecognition of Helen as a character who stands in for real subjects (the historical position of women, the biographical Helen, etc.) I believe that H.D.’s commitments in *Helen in Egypt* lie not in revising Freud’s notions of feminine sexuality, but rather, in extending Freud’s theories of psychic *textuality*. H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* offers no compelling story of emancipation, *precisely because* this epic of failed transcendence is engaged

with those terms that structure the impasses of Freudian memory: writing, inscription, myth, machine, trace, erasure, and, most importantly, translation. From this perspective, a new significance emerges from the quest of H.D.'s Helen: her coming-to-consciousness *as an effect* of textuality procedurally constitutes the unfolding of the text itself. The processuality of the text, staging one incomplete transcendence after another, details the journey of Helen-as-writing, while performing the very obstacle with which she engages. The text represents a meta-conscious critique of Schliemannian obsessions that would search for historical origins hermetically obscured yet preserved within textual artifacts.

H.D. transforms such obsessions from hermeneutic method into problematic content. Helen, we might say, engages in what Derrida has called "*mal d'archive*" or archive fever. What she finds is that the history she would uncover is a history she is already in the middle of repeating ("*The players have no choice in the matter of the already-written drama or script*") (230). Thus, while the "already-written" has yet to be read, its inscription comes from sources "unresearchable." For Freud's soul-machine, as for H.D.'s Helen, the problem of memory is its radically unmoored independence from consciousness. But while consciousness for Freud *has* no memory, consciousness is still determined by and predicated upon the terrain of memory. What, then, are the horizons of this translation between memory and mind, *res* and *cogitans*? This is the question that haunts H.D.'s Helen.

For Helen's character in H.D.'s epic, the problem is, as it was for Freud's soul-machine, the problem of consciousness—the problem of how consciousness arises, independent from memory. Is there independence from memory? This is the question that haunts H.D.'s Helen, and we must remember, in reading the epic, that Helen is *not a human being*—not even according to myth (she is half divine). H.D.'s epic accentuates this latent inhumanity to Helen as mythic text-

effect: mythic text-effect: a character embedded in a culture's collective memory through myth, a fact that acquires a self-conscious dimension within the course of H.D.'s poem. Helen is and always has been a character embedded in the collective memory through myth. Especially given H.D.'s well-known conversation with Freud, this poem may read as a simulation of the *predicament of the written*, the predicament of *memory itself*. This epic simulation is, moreover, prophetically relevant to an era in which humans begin concerted efforts to outmode their own minds by building artificial intelligence.

A passage like the following echoes Freud's  $\psi$ -system, located on the haunted hitherside of the mind's machine memory, hearing memory as inscribed voice to which there is no access:

How does the Message reach me?  
do thoughts fly like the Word  
of the goddess? a whisper—  
  
(my own thought or the thought of another?)  
[...]  
I swerve about to surprise  
this Presence, this Voice  
but the long arcade is empty  
[...]  
is it all a story? (87-88)

Clytemnestra, here, is the voice-presence; if we read Clytemnestra in the same way, that is, as *literally* as function of text, with no historical outside but textuality, we may better understand

Helen's odd questions as to whether this ghostly voice is Fate or her sister:

is it a story told,  
a shadow of a shadow,  
  
has it ever happened,  
or is it yet to come?  
do I myself invent  
  
this tale of my sister's fate? (68-69)

What we as readers watch Helen nearly discover time and again is that her world *is* “all a story.” Her thoughts cannot be clearly distinguished from the thoughts of “others.” Helen as a character of myth is lost in the labyrinth of myth, seeking vainly to uncover her recursive, infinitely translated experience. Her quest to unify herself as a self of translations evokes the workings of Freud’s unconscious “ $\psi$ -system,” that haunted repository where memory’s voices echo but can neither emerge into consciousness nor merge into reconstituted immediacy.<sup>71</sup> There is an absolute and articulating distance between operating system and memory.

Reading *Helen in Egypt* against the event of the machine-mind’s origination reveals a work prophetically relevant to the quest for artificial intelligence: “*Helen remembers her part... She seems almost to speak by rote,*” the prose narrator observes—and here this speaking by rote, this automatism of mythic textuality suggests that “*she has grown into her part. But she breaks off... from the recorded drama to remind us of the unrecorded*” (here, to remember an apocryphal meeting with Achilles on the beach) (234). This meeting of Achilles on the beach—ephemeral marginalia to a greater story of war—is the “unrecorded” encounter at the very center of *Helen in Egypt*. It is the mystery that drives Helen back into her textual past, as she struggles to discern whether the meeting with Achilles has significance. Boundaries between subject and object of cognition blur for Helen, as do her memories with her own inventions.

As the narrator explains in a passage concerning Helen’s ability to read hieroglyphs, “*Helen herself denies an actual intellectual knowledge of the temple-symbols. But she is nearer to them than the instructed scribe... She herself is the writing*” (22). This final sentence, one of the epic’s most quoted lines, seems also to contain the key to the poem’s inquiry: can the apparatus become conscious? Can the program, the code, the inscription speak *beyond* the

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<sup>71</sup> Clytemnestra represents the voice-presence of inaccessible memory; if we read Clytemnestra as we read Helen, we may better understand Helen’s questions as to whether this ghostly voice is Fate: “is it a story told, / a shadow of a shadow, / / has it ever happened, / or is it yet to come? / do I myself invent // this tale of my sister’s fate?” (68).

recorded? Does text, code, or memory have the potential to gain access to itself? If “she herself is the writing,” is she agent or object of memory? This inquiry left ultimately unresolved. In the Freudian machine-mind, writing (like Helen) is memory, and memory (like Helen) undergoes multiple redactions, all left open to doubt. Human memory, in this sense, approaches computational memory. It is learned by “(w)rote.” Helen may be seen as both history’s memory-trace and, analogically, consciousness’ renewable neurons, forever separated from all but memory’s ghost, unable to retain the writing that she *is*.

Significantly, critic Adelaide Morris believes that “It is in many ways easier to back-read *Helen in Egypt* from the standpoint of a virtual world than it is to situate it securely in a world of print” (77).<sup>72</sup> We might also read the “virtual world” of H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* through an account of its technologically coeval genealogy—Freud, military cryptanalysis, nuclear warfare. Such an account will attend to how metaphors of technological media-memory have been mobilized, pursuing the technological ligatures between Freud’s “soul-apparatus” and H.D.’s own, poetic Mystic-Writing-Pad. These metaphors of mediatic memory, I believe, have a longer history than any of their individual, concrete manifestations.

Take, for example, the nonlinear sequence of inventiveness in a plan like Vannevar Bush’s project to build the first computational search engine, or “memex”: “Our ineptitude in getting at the record is largely caused by the artificiality of systems of indexing. When data of any sort are placed in storage, they are filed alphabetically or numerically,” Bush recommends moving backwards in time rather than forwards, suggesting we look to that archaic and embodied technology, the human brain, which “does not work in that way. It operates by association... suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of

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<sup>72</sup> While Morris relates H.D.’s work to contemporaneous developments in technologies of “secondary orality”—in and Ongian and Kittlerian vein—and to cinema, she gives no serious thought to the question of computation, which her term “virtuality” might otherwise seem to suggest.

trails carried by the cells of the brain.” Writing in 1946, Bush is clearly inspired by the work of psychoanalysis, particularly that of Freud. The Freudian model, in fact, persists to this day in the two separate but conversant systems of any computer—operating system and memory.

In the “Wunderblock” essay, Freud observes of the various “contraptions that we substitute for our memory,” that “these aiding-apparatuses, invented for the improvement or fortification of our sense-functions, are all constructed in the manner of the sense organ itself, or a part thereof” (GW XIV: 4).<sup>73</sup> Some years later, Vannevar Bush draws on Freud’s insights into the associational logic of dreams; he decides to repeat this associational processing in his memex, defined as “a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility” (32). Bush calls this invention an “intimate supplement to his memory,” something that Freud—and Socrates—extends definitionally to all writing technologies. Freud, if not Bush, was well-aware of the myth of writing’s origin, in which it was invented by the Egyptian divinity, Thoth. Mythically, this technology is derided for its ironically deleterious consequences: in helping mankind to remember, it also caused them to forget.

Yet Freud’s theories of memory and its psychical writing apparatus put a new twist on this old legend. Memory, having always been psychic writing, re-experiences its own tragedy in the invention of physical writing, namely, the tragedy of its inability to be present to consciousness. Memory, as a form of writing, cannot speak. Writing, as a form of memory, cannot be recalled. The discreteness of the two systems, therefore, comes to be displaced in its tragedy onto every history of writing; that is, until the cyberneticists began to rethink the system from the ground up, hoping someday to merge all systems into one. Freud’s concept of mnemic

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<sup>73</sup> “Vorrichtungen, mit denen wir unser Gedächtnis substituieren”... “Die Hilfsapparate, welche wir zur Verbesserung oder Verstärkung unserer Sinnesfunktionen erfunden haben, sind alle so gebaut wie das Sinnesorgan selbst oder Teile desselben.”

technology, and its operational engagement with translation helps us to approach anew this relation between technology and poetic form, just as *Helen in Egypt* meditates on hieroglyphs, textual survival, translation, history, and its encryption at a time that exactly coincides with humanity's invention of a new language, one that could not say things, but rather one that could *do* things. This language, the operational codes of a computer that perform electrical "thought" in minute circuitry, is itself untranslatable: not because it is "inscrutable" or "unresearchable" but because its system of reference is self-sufficient, tautological. At this computational beginning of a new chapter in the history of writing, we see that what returns is the specter of another myth: the prelapsarian dream of a world without translation. This is the myth of the world before Babel, a world before the diversity of language, a diversity presumed to be necessarily divisive.

#### The Tower of Anti-Babel: Machine Translation in the Time of the Cold War

*A most serious problem, for UNESCO and for the constructive and peaceful future of the planet, is the problem of translation.*  
—Warren Weaver, 1947,  
in a letter to Norbert Wiener<sup>74</sup>

"Students of languages and of the structures of languages, the logicians who design computers, the electronic engineers who build and run them...are now engaged in erecting a new Tower of Anti-Babel," writes Warren Weaver in 1955, looking back on his directorial success in the government sponsored project of machine translation, of one the postwar period's first projects in computational linguistics. "One envisaged a sort of pseudo-mechanical translating device," Weaver recalls of the initial ways in which information scientists imagined constructing a computationally mechanized dictionary. This dictionary, blending the mind of the translator with the material archive of the dictionary, called up a chimerical image that would soon be left

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<sup>74</sup> Weaver 1955b: 18.



behind—a chimera passing from the stage of book and brain to the stage of information processing device by way of the automaton.” (1955a: vii). Weaver, renowned explicator of Claude Shannon’s theoretical work in information science in their co-authored work, *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949), was now a well-regarded spokesman for the field. . His professionally strategic location placed him between the “cyberneticists” (a diverse group of technicians working in computational intelligence) and the funding interests of the U.S. government. Cold War strategies during this period centered on armaments projects (building the first hydrogen bomb) as a policy of mutually assured destruction and, as its preemptive counterpart: the interception of enemy intelligence. This was where Weaver’s machine translation project would find its niche.

World War II had been the proving ground for the strategic value of cryptography. A combined Allied effort in this field saw pioneers Claude Shannon, Marian Rejewski, Alan Turing, Norbert Wiener, Julian Bigelow, and many others at work on separate but interrelated projects that operated on predictive linguistic models. These projects were not concerned with the calculations of causal variables, as in the classical questions of ballistic science; instead they proceeded from infinitely more complex calculations of stochastic processes. Stochastic processes, phenomena best mapped through the mathematics of probability, present a level of complexity necessitating not only innovative mathematics, but also machinic aids for the completion of their staggeringly involved calculations. It was here that non-human computers made their first usable appearance. The idea that, in addition to computational untangling of enemy *codes*, the translation of enemy *languages*, might be “technically feasible” was an idea that emerged once applications for automatic digital computers were formulated, initially by Weaver and Booth in 1946. “Weaver suggested that all language might contain basic elements

which could be detected by means of the techniques developed during World War II for the breaking of enemy codes,” Booth recollected (Booth/ Locke, 2). This computational imaginary marks a major shift in those technologically compatible theories of language that would guide the development of computational linguistics and, later, models for artificial intelligence. It is of paramount importance that this computational theory of language conceived itself originally as a theory of translation. And yet, what was meant by “translation” would not in any way have been recognizable to philologists. What was meant by “translation” here was a function of transparent correspondence performed by error-free cognition.

In 1947, Weaver wrote to Norbert Wiener that he was proceeding with machine translation based on the hypothesis that “the problem of translation could conceivably be treated as a problem in cryptography. When I look at an article in Russian I say: ‘This is really written in English, but it has been coded in some strange symbols’” (1955b: 18). Mathematical calculations might provide a short-cut to the tedious human process of mastering fluency in a language, but other outcomes besides efficiency were sought. Machine translation engineers “envisage a purely mechanical process... which, if applied to the input text, will result in an output translation, and which, if reapplied to the translation, will reproduce the original input text” (Booth/Locke, 1). In other words, in this theory of language, translation involves a complete reversibility. Language is no longer translated, only “transposed” or “transcoded.” “A final step would be the mechanization of the whole process of human translation including an automatic input of the original text into the machine and the automatic production of an exact and unambiguous output” (Booth/Locke, 2). The idea of “exact and unambiguous” translation reveals that the problem posed by (enemy) language for the digital computer is not cracking its code or mastering its mathematics: the problem is reducing its imprecision, its ambiguity, its nonreversibility. In the

theory of machine translation, the “entropy” of the message must be brought as near to zero as possible: everything must be recoverable and potentially reversible. Information science disarticulates “message” from message’s *meaning*. Yet is translation of information equivalent to translation of *language*?

In his 1950 manifesto of information science, Norbert Wiener explained that, “It is the purpose of Cybernetics to develop a language and techniques that will enable us indeed to attack the problem of control and communication in general.... In control and communication we are always fighting nature’s tendency to degrade the organized and to destroy the meaningful; the tendency... for entropy to increase” (17). That is, in order to technologize translation, a new non-degradable language resistant to entropy must be developed. Beyond the issues of electrical engineering enabling the *transmission* of messages, the goal of cybernetics, by producing a new theory of messages, was to illuminate that “a larger field which includes not only the study of language but the study of messages as a means of controlling machinery and society, the development of computing machines and other such automata, certain reflections upon psychology and the nervous system, and a tentative new theory of scientific method. This larger theory of messages is probabilistic theory” (Wiener, 15). Here we see the question of control—over machinery *as well as* over society—being linked, counter-intuitively, to the question of chance. How will this “tentative new theory of scientific method”, which includes within its provenance automata and the human nervous system alike, reconceptualize language via technologies of translation?

In his memorandum to 200 colleagues written on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1949, Weaver effectively founded a new theory of language: most of these colleagues had never before heard of the concept of machine translation of language through a computer, and the document became a

defining moment for the field. The “cryptographic-translation idea” put forward here by Weaver projects that the statistical characteristics of language must “make deep use of language invariants” (1955b: 21-22). He asks his readers to “Think, by analogy, of individuals living in a series of tall closed towers, all erected over a common foundation.... they shout back and forth, each from his own closed tower.... But, when an individual goes down his tower, he finds himself in a great open basement, common to all the towers.” In their introduction to *Machine Translation*, Booth and Locke adumbrate computational possibilities for “the creation of a possible interlanguage or machineese into which concepts expressed in any given language could be translated, and from which these concepts could then be translated into any other language” (7). Here, the future commonality of languages proceeds from a demand for language’s reversibility. This projection of mathematical models to map linguistic commonality suggests to Weaver what sounds like an age-old utopia: “to descend...[to] the real but as yet undiscovered universal language” (1955b: 23). This “yet undiscovered universal language” is distinct from earlier attempts (i.e., Leibniz) to found a universal *fluency*. Rather, the distinctiveness of this project of pure translation lies in its cybernetic emphasis on “control” (whence the “cyber” in “cybernetics”).<sup>75</sup> In the construction of this “new Tower of Anti-Babel. ...it is hoped that it will build part of the way back to that mythical situation of simplicity and power when men could communicate freely together, and when this contributed so notably to their effectiveness” (Weaver 1955a: vii). The cybernetic dream at play here is the transformation of freedom of communication into a precondition for an “effective” utopia of “simplicity and power.” For cybernetic machine translation, linguistic transparency born of absolute transitivity is the goal. In other words, cybernetics reaches toward language because of its ultimate desire to conflate communication and command. Cybernetics is an actually existing form of “magical thinking.”

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<sup>75</sup> Greek for “helmsman” or “pilot”

“When I give an order to a machine,” Wiener believes, the situation is the same as “that which arises when I give an order to a person.... I am aware of the order that has gone out and of the signal of compliance that has come back” (16). What lies behind this mathematical elision of the fundamental difference between persuasion and observation, duress and description? Wiener’s analogy flattens into equivalence through the disfiguring perspective of machine manipulation: “When I control the actions of another person, I communicate a message to him, and although this message is in the imperative mood, the technique of communication does not differ from that of a message of fact.” Language, then, must become yet another technology capable of returning unambiguous “signals of compliance” in a closed circuit of communication.

Russian was the first target: by January of 1954, around the time that H.D. began the final section of *Helen in Egypt*, IBM was exhibiting in New York, with much publicity, their general purpose computer, model 701, programmed with a vocabulary of 250 English words that could translate a variety of Russian sentences.<sup>76</sup> Forty years after these beginnings, computer scientist W. Daniel Hillis expresses a sentiment completely consonant with cybernetics’ initial philosophical stance, asserting that “theoretical limitations of computers provide no useful dividing line between human beings and machines....[T]he brain is a kind of computer, and thought is just a complex computation” (75). How have we come from stochastic translation of language to equivalence with cognition? The “simplicity and power” of the infinitely manipulatable agent—whether machine or human being—was being proposed to replace the unruly signals of non-compliance found everywhere in society, in the “noise” of circuits and of natural entropy. This complete reconstruction of the fundamental category of the “given” was achieved through a reconceptualization of the world not as ontic or empirical but as *information*: or, in its Latin translation—as “data.”

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<sup>76</sup> See Booth / Locke for discussion of this exhibition.

“With a couple of electrodes on the skull the encephalograph now produces pen-and-ink traces which bear some relation to the electrical phenomena going on in the brain itself,” writes Vannevar Bush, the scientist singlehandedly responsible for the final approval of the Manhattan Project, and later known for his pioneering work in computational models that inspired the internet. Located within this “data” of human thought is a similarly troubling indeterminacy to that discovered within language with machine translators: “True, the record is unintelligible... but who would now place bounds on where such a thing may lead?” he writes. The infinite or “Endless Horizons” (to cite the title of his book) opened by computational models of the world lie in their having fundamentally reduced all “givenness” to binary forms of data: “In the outside world, all forms of intelligence, whether of sound or sight, have been reduced to the form of varying currents in an electric circuit in order that they may be transmitted. Inside the human frame exactly the same sort of process occurs.” (Bush 1946: 38)

In this new universe of simplicity and power, simplicity *is* power, while complexity, indeterminacy, and ambiguity are threats, and universal language is based on the most reliable form of difference (1 or 0). Having reduced all existing phenomena to digitally measurable signals, this vast transcoding project seeks to eliminate all unnecessary waste derived from other forms of translation: “Must we always transform to mechanical movements in order to proceed from one electrical phenomenon to another?” (Bush 1946: 37) In this transformation of the world to *eliminate* needless translation, creating what Bush calls the “instrumentalities of the future,” he notes that, “We know that when the eye sees, all the consequent information is transmitted to the brain by means of electrical vibrations in the channel of the optic nerve. This is an exact analogy with the electrical vibrations which occur in the cable of a television set.” Yet, this “exact analogy” is less a contradiction in terms than a performative vitiation of the very ethics of

analogy, namely, to speak of finite identity while preserving incommensurable difference. This mind of exacting equivalence, instead, wonders why, if “the impulses which flow in the arm nerves of a typist convey to her fingers the translated information which reaches her eye or ear, in order that the fingers may be caused to strike the proper keys,” what should stand in the way of eliminating the neurochemical translation from electricity to mechanics? “Might not these currents be intercepted?” causing thought to flow from one electrical source (the typist) to another (the computer)? (Bush 1946: 36-37) Whether intercepting the nerve impulses of a human or the message of an “enemy language,” machine translation was always, in fact, a project to *circumvent* translation. The typist becomes a relay of neurotransmitters, Russian becomes a permutation of translanguistic mathematics. Bush observes that computational science is designed to free the human mind of certain “ground in the given,” since “Whenever logical processes of thought are employed—that is, whenever thought for a time runs along an accepted groove—there is an opportunity for the machine.” The opportunity for the machine is an opportunity for the human, to perfect the processes of thought: “Put in a set of premises into such a device and turn the crank, and it will readily pass out conclusion after conclusion, all in accordance with logical law, and with no more slips than would be expected of a keyboard adding machine” (1946: 28).

Problems and resolutions, via formal logic, are precisely the painstaking labor that these machines are designed to reduce: “every time one combines and records facts in accordance with established logical processes, the creative aspect of thinking is concerned only with the selection of the data and the process to be employed.” This leads Bush to conclude such manipulation “is repetitive in nature and hence a fit matter to be relegated to the machines.” In a statement that may as well be addressed to Aristotle, Bush notes that while “Formal logic used to

be a keen instrument,” now, thanks to the computer, “It is readily possible to construct a machine which will manipulate premises in accordance with formal logic, simply by the clever use of relay circuits” (1946: 26).

The question remains: how to move from intercepting the nerve-currents of the typist to intercepting the *language* in which the typist is typing? Language, not mappable into the domain of formal logic, is constitutively unavailable to the language of electronic circuits. So how does the brain process it? The bridge between language and the circuit will be found, according to the inventors of machine translation, through the universal language of (probabilistic) mathematics, capable of accounting for counterfactuals. Wiener writes that “in the probabilistic world we no longer deal with quantities and statements which concern a specific, real universe as a whole but ask instead questions which may find their answers in a large number of similar universes.”

According to the viewpoint of cybernetics, this is as true of language as it is of the energy states of an electron. This problem of “an element of incomplete determinism, almost an irrationality in the world, is in a certain way parallel to Freud’s admission of a deep irrational component in human conduct and thought,” asserts Wiener (11). This parallel is no allegory. Human irrationality is in fact only one subset of a greater, entropic irrationality. Subject to those probabilistic mathematics that govern circuits and electrons, cognition theoretically shares in this universal, entropic irrationality.

It may seem strange to hear Freud mentioned in connection with Cold War cybernetics, especially since Freud’s theory of irrationality was the foundation of a psychology, not an ontology. Yet Wiener’s having identified Freud with the scientific project of technologizing the mind is in fact astute. The concept of a machine-mind, or, the mind’s machine-like qualities, was as pertinent to the interests of Freud as it was to the later cyberneticists. In what follows, I will



elaborate on how a genealogy of speculation regarding the machine-mind links Freud and the cyberneticists—in their research, if not in their object. I will also take up the well-known conversation between Freud and H.D., begun in 1933 and extended throughout their lives to re-read this collaboration from the perspective of its technological inflection. With respect to the stakes of “memory”—in the dream-time of cultural myth, in the computational simultaneity of the database—Freud’s theory of memory and language intersects with his concept of the “mnemic apparatus.” I will also show how H.D., adopting this concept, adapts it for her epic of translation so as to inquire into humanity’s potential for *difference* from its own machinic creations. This difference, if one may be proposed, shall come from what is meant by a capacity for language: and here Freud, H.D., and cyberneticists concur. As Paola Zaccaria has described, H.D.’s epic is “constantly going further down into the past to resurrect ... a future passionately envisioned as different, where nothing is lost, but nothing remains as it was” (85). A cyberneticist like Wiener finds in statistical mathematics a release from “statements which concern a specific, real universe,” a release that allows him to search for “answers in a large number of similar universes.” In uncanny affinity, but with a crucial difference, H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* may be read as pursuing a parallel quest, journeying through the historical landscape of writing, translation, and memory in order to explore in contrast the ways that these prior paradigms are being outmoded by technological alterations to the meaning and uses of language.

#### Reed-Only Memory: “Egypt” at the Origin of Writing

*“There’s nothing ornamental about the style of a real poet: everything is a necessary hieroglyph.” –A.W. Schlegel*

*“Life is an island here and now in a dying world.” –Norbert Wiener*

“H.D.’s Egypt,” writes Nathaniel Mackey, “is a measure of lack, the excised ancestor on whose excision Western civilization Westernized itself” (233). Dianne Chisholm, in *H.D.’s Freudian Poetics*, would agree with Mackay that H.D.’s use of an Egyptian subtext “shakes the edifice of Greek thinking” which would otherwise be the poem’s “most stable structure”; in consequence, this setting in Egypt “promises to have a destabilizing effect on all Western civilization, whose foundations were erected in the name of Hellas” (168). This process Chisholm reads as “at once a translation and an analysis... an allegory of translation” that “entails the decentering and displacement of Greek philosophy” as well as attacking “the stronghold of the logic of binary opposition” between hieroglyphs and letters (169). Chisholm offers this decentering as “a therapeutics for the Western imagination, especially modern consciousness, so immobilized in logical and categorical abstraction, so alienated from the vital, mobilizing source of representation” (178). But what would this vital source be?

DuPlessis’s reading of *Helen in Egypt* as an “anti-war text,” locates its “examination of the roots of violence in repression of love of the mother,” and that proposes substituting a “lyre for ‘bowman’s arc’ and ‘a rhythm as yet unheard,/ to challenge the trumpet-note’” (114). Yet I read Thetis, the mother-figure in *Helen in Egypt*, as illuminating an explicit link between war and technology: when we find war-minded Achilles “caring nothing for heat, / nothing for cold, / numb with a memory, // a sort of ecstasy of desolation,” the poem turns to regard Thetis, who is looking on: “did she laugh to see her son, / entrapped in the armoury// the iron and ruin? / did she come,/ his eidolon?” (256-7). Entrapped in the armoury, the iron and ruin, lost in an ecstasy of desolation, it may seem that Western culture, here figured by the feckless and vengeful Achilles, has fallen victim to its own “coercive official discourses” which have transformed the world so utterly that now, according to Tony Triglio, the only way out is to “reconceive apocalypse as a

mode of consciousness”: to invent, as he sees in H.D.’s work, an “apocalypse without fatalism” (16). Friedman speaks of H.D. as “consciously rejecting the mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality that formed the faith of the empirical modern” (cited in Friedman 1978: 94, 98), yet twentieth century science was in fact defined by a wholesale rejection of earlier “mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality,” re-orienting itself to the new fields of quantum theory and thermodynamics-as-statistics, informational models used in computation and encryption. If H.D. is rejecting the materialist mechanism of earlier science, is she to be seen as opposing the technicians of modernity, or joining them?

Poet Elizabeth Willis argues that of H.D.’s response to her historical moment “engages the most crucial issues these shifts bring up; namely, the relation between technology and poetic form, the role of memory in cultural survival and progress” (82). Keeping in mind H.D.’s concern about nuclear warfare, I will approach this relation between technology and poetic form firstly through the question of *memory as technology*, and secondly through this memory’s stake in the act and process of translation. This epic may in fact be explored through a form of figurative “media archaeology,” that which Wolfgang Ernst defines as identifying a “stratum—matrix—in cultural sedimentation that is neither purely human nor purely technological, but literally in between.” Such media archaeology seeks out the significance of “symbolic operations that can be performed by machines and that turn the human into a machine as well” (251). I would highlight the “*literally* in between” status of memory in the age of writing technology, where divisions between human and machine are drawn not by form or function but by the status of translation. For the human, translation will emerge as the condition of all linguistic experience; for the machine, translation will be an operation *conditioned* by a unitary,

underlying, and programmed language. But before considering the “literally” in between status of post-human memory, we must consider the origin of a slightly older technology.

Eileen Gregory has observed that Helen, a figure recurrent in H.D.’s writing, “is never immediately located in Greece or in Troy, but only indirectly, through memory or legend. She is proto-Alexandrian, located mythically at the junctures that define historical Alexandria.”

Alexandria, named for an early practitioner of global empire, but famous for its library, is famous also for the total disappearance of perhaps a millennia of classical documents in its fire from the fourth century B.C.E. This Alexandria of myth, “between East and West, Troy and Greece; between ancient and modern,” is also the site of a vanished textual history; a tragic and irreplaceable lacuna in the history of translation. This Alexandria lies “between inscription and transcription; between dead and living; between the lost and the recovered” (Gregory 1997: 52). In fact, as we hear from literary documents that escaped the Alexandrian fire, Helen was “never in Troy,” but in Egypt. Thus H.D.’s Helen speaks from the shore of that city whose library preserved her memory; yet this same fire may have destroyed innumerable other and now irrecoverable versions of Helen. Thus, “between the lost and the recovered,” Helen as an effect of translation was “never in Troy,” but in Egypt.<sup>77</sup>

Egypt, according to that same classical tradition partly destroyed, partly preserved in its libraries, was famed as the birthplace of humanity’s most epoch-making technology, that of writing. A myth of Helen in Egypt is a myth of Helen surviving—or returned to—the origin of writing. Yet Helen, as a figure of countless, composite translations, also brings with her the

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<sup>77</sup> Troy itself may never have been in Troy: the city’s mythical status remains contested. However, Schliemann’s 19<sup>th</sup> century excavations of the “real Troy” would have been known to H.D., and she might, very well, have also heard of the city’s re-enacted past during World War I: “On April 25 [1915], the Allies landed // on Gallipoli. Maps of the Dardanelles appeared prominently in the London papers in the next weeks. ... Troy itself was in the news. The French landed on the Asiatic side of the straits and took the hill of Hissarlik, or Troy, on April 30. The Times reported that the Turks had used the line of Schliemann’s excavations for machine gun emplacements.... Here was a palimpsest with an ugly twist” (Roessel, 41).

specter of an earlier, undateable oral tradition, an oral poetic tradition of memory whose withering away began with writing's technological innovation. H.D. is drawn to Helen's exile in Egypt because of the mythical status Egypt holds as birthplace of the history of human archival consciousness.<sup>78</sup> The epic and the epoch in question begin with inventions in writing; they concern the precipitous moment of writing's transformation. The transition into computational writing is as pivotal as the transformation from oral tradition into writing. The history of writing, "transposed or translated," is the thread that guides the progression of H.D.'s poem: *Helen in Egypt* is an archaeology of writing's memory-trace.

In Egypt, then, Helen finds herself poised paradoxically at the origin of her survival and the site of her destruction—through the respective technologies of writing and of memory; but was this Helen's first technological translation? In the years coinciding with H.D.'s earliest experiments in translating Euripides's *Helen*, a Harvard University professor of Classics was scouring the backwoods of the Balkans, tape recorder in hand; he was searching for the last remaining practitioners of the Mediterranean oral tradition, hoping to prove that the mnemonic technologies of oral language could ensure a continuum of information dating from the prehistory of Greece. Milman Parry, in his ground-breaking research from 1933-1935, collected in *The Making of Homeric Verse*, found overwhelming evidence, firstly, for the oral (and not written) origin of the Homeric epics; secondly, for the use of linguistic formulae, devices, recursions, in short, linguistic and mnemonic *technology* to compose and convey through human memory the enormity of these sagas intact.

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<sup>78</sup> Historical and contemporary Egypt have played a role in several postcolonial readings of this text. Susan Edmunds was the first to suggest and discuss at length the thesis that H.D.'s writing might have been influenced by African independence movements in the postwar periods [1994: 149-76]. Judith Tabron discusses decolonization in specific relation to *Helen in Egypt*. While Edmunds feels that *Helen in Egypt* suppresses the emerging history of Egypt's decolonization struggle, Tabron congratulates H.D. on her creation of a character (Helen) who is on the one hand constructed by cultural memory but, on the other hand, capable of self-determination. See Friedman 1981: 286-96 for a reading of the dialectics of Egyptian myth and the Kabbalah in *Helen in Egypt*.

Parry's work (extended and completed by Albert Lord in his *Singer of Tales*) symptomized changes of disciplinary perspective only in the field of Classics, but also in the birth of information science, which approached language from a similar theoretical position. In this paradigm, the semantic dimension of language acts as an obstructing force, in conflict with language's conveyance through statistical patterns of materialized recurrence: whether as phonemes, as letters, or as the electronic pulses that create informational bits. In fact, this moment was nothing less than the conflation, by technology, of two separate dimensions of language that had never in recorded history been anything but materially (if not philosophically) distinct: that is, writing and speech became technologically identical.

"According to the *Pallinode*, Helen was never in Troy," begins *Helen in Egypt*. The *Pallinode* (or "palin-ode"—"song against") to which she refers alludes to a fragment from the Ancient Greek poet, Stesichorus. In this fragment, Stesichorus, having been struck blind by Aphrodite for maligning Helen's character, hopes to un-sing the damage to Helen and to his own annulled vision: "No it is not the true story/ No you were never on the benched ships/ No you never came to the towers of Troy" (Carson, 17). Beginning her modernist epic of Helen of Troy by concurring with Stesichorus's *arrested* vision, H.D. signals her shared concern for the question that Stesichorus poses: can a song un-sing anything but its own words? Addressed to whom, or, in which direction, should song be sung in the aftermath of war? Can poetic language alone effect un-blinding? And what of the blindness of war? For "Helen was never in Troy. She had been transposed or translated from Greece into Egypt. The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion" (1961: 1). Just as the opening moments of this verse epic pose the question of the efficacy of poetic language—and its direction—so, too, they pose or *trans-pose* the question of translation and its role in the creation of illusion. "Trans-posed or trans-lated,"

H.D.'s be-lated Helen is twenty-five centuries older, yet perhaps more relevant than ever before. This late modernist Helen enters newly into the space of poetic song, while again in translation and again in an era of uneasy peace—or, incessantly global yet marginalized wars of containment. What in this age will Helen's specter enjoin to be un-sung?

*Helen in Egypt* proceeds through three stages and three sections. In the first, "Pallinode," the plight of Helen's translation (in space, but also, through the many historical layers of conflicting myth) is addressed, as Helen confronts her star-crossed lover: and, in H.D.'s version, this lover is not Paris, but Achilles. In the second section, "Leuké," Helen leaves Egypt to travel through various Mediterranean islands, encountering characters from her contradictory past (Theseus, Paris) and undergoing a kind of anamnesis, purging herself of these stories that function as memories: her own as well as those belonging to various histories and cultures—remembered "in her name." In the final section, "Eidolon" (Gk. "image") Helen, according to the epic's narrator (a voice distinguished throughout by speaking in prose), becomes "concerned with the human content of the drama" (255). What has become clear, by this time, is that Helen herself is not to be included in this "human content"; Helen has been established not as a human into whose subjectivity we might inquire, whose agency we might fault, or whose memories we might rely upon for an account of war. Helen has been revealed to be what she always has been, an "illusion" of myth, a character and a symbol based on collective, interwoven epics. Helen is an effect of memory and of text. H.D.'s own work in *Helen in Egypt* is to show not only this, but that memory and text, like Helen, are themselves a function of translation's refracting powers.

In this postwar epic, "concerned with the human content of the drama," Helen of Troy becomes a textual effect of translation that regards and meditates on translation's human conveyers. Bound up with the question of war made apocalyptic through the invention of nuclear

technology, humanity's future is "transposed or translated" through one of its oldest surviving tales into an allegory of textual consciousness. The question raised by H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* concerns not only the future of war *as* the end of humanity's future, but also concerns the future of memory itself, a future figured by and yet also instantiated within the future of translation. Who better to inquire into the future of memory *as* the future of translation than one of its most contested figures, Helen of Troy? Fittingly, H.D. herself, by the time that she begins work on her final *magnum opus*, had lived through the question of how one is remembered as an artist, and as a translator, in the fitful half-century of modernism and its transformation by two wars.

H.D.'s career begins and ends with translation—from the Greek epigrams reworked in her debut collection *Sea Garden* (1916) through to *Helen in Egypt* (1961), published the year of her death. Her career also begins and ends with modernism's indebted relation to translation as a founding aesthetic practice in which language ceases to be transparent to expression, becoming instead "a medium for poetry."<sup>79</sup> Her philosophy achieves its denouement in her verse-epic, *Helen in Egypt* represents the fact of language as a *history of translation*: a material history, an artifact. For H.D., whose philosophy is formed in collaboration with (though at certain distance from) the psychoanalytic research of Sigmund Freud, language bridges the border between the thought and the un-thought (the unconscious), operating as translator, never as "authentic" utterance; while memory, also a form of the un-thought, consists of a compendium of irreducible translations, "transposed or translated" not only from the small orbit of the personal, but more importantly from the impersonal realm of culture and history, especially from history's "refuse," the history that culture refuses to know.

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<sup>79</sup> Between the Hellenism of the Imagist movement, with H.D. as its first figurehead, and the 1919 publication, by Ezra Pound, of Ernest Fenollosa's *On the Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, translation became a crucial artistic trope, practice, and philosophy for modernists (Joyce, Eliot, Yeats, Lowell, Pound, H.D.) For a detailed account of translation in the practice of a wide range of Modernists, see Stephen Yao's *Translation and the Languages of Modernism* (2002).



H.D.'s Helen, standing on the shores of Egypt in an indeterminate time (800 B.C.E.? 1961 C.E.?) thus finds herself summoned to yet another poetic crossroads, that of three different temporalities of language: the time of translation and textual survival; the time of vast archival destruction, and the aftermath of its corruptions; and the time in which writing and speech come to be technologically "transposed or translated" into equivalently usable stochastic procedures. In this context we may see that if H.D. is "writing out of a post-nuclear consciousness for which the universe has become an infinitely transformable electromagnetic field" (Crown 1996: 267), part of that post-nuclear electromagnetic field is the new electronically driven technologies of language: where memory and the database, epic and information are swiftly being made indistinguishable, on an operational level, from computer-mapping of the explosion of a thermonuclear warhead. What H.D. alludes to, in *Helen in Egypt* as the "flash in the heaven at noon that blinds the sun,"<sup>80</sup> is the scientific and technological transformation that has altered light itself, through science (relativity theory and a quantum mechanics based on the electromagnetic theory of light) and through its attendant technologies (from nuclear weapons to electromagnetic textuality).<sup>81</sup>

#### Translation's Memory-Trace: H.D.'s Hieroglyphic Helen

"Do not despair, the hosts/ surging beneath the Walls,/ (no more than I) are ghosts" begins *Helen in Egypt*'s first lyric, posing an eerie counter-song (or "palinode") to the traditional invoking of the Muse (1). If the verse epic classically begins with a bardic apostrophe transmitting from the living to the unliving (Gods, Muses, the Dead), then H.D.'s epic begins

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<sup>80</sup> Morris has similarly connected this line to "the flash of the atomic bombs dropped by the Allies on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 but also as the flash of the hydrogen bombs detonated by the United States on 1 November 1952 at the Eniwetok proving grounds in the Pacific and on 1 March 1954 at the Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific." (85n30).

<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of how H.D.'s prose figures electric and erotic valences, see Vetter, 61-65.

with a reversal of that circuit of address; here, the poet compares herself to the ghostliness of the dead soldiers whom she will sing. If the poet is an apparition, whom does she address? How dead or undead *are* those hosts “surging beneath the Walls”? *To whom are they dead*, and in what capacity are they still living on? Of her time spent learning from Freud, H.D. describes how mnemonic traces were “skillfully pieced together like the exquisite Greek tear-jars and iridescent glass bowls and vases that gleamed in the dusk from the shelves of the cabinet that faced me where I stretched, propped up on the couch in the room in Berggasse 19, Wien IX. The dead were living in so far as they lived in memory or were recalled in dream.” “Thoughts were things, to be collected, collated, analyzed, shelved, or resolved. Fragmentary ideas, apparently unrelated, were often found to be part of a special layer or stratum of thought and memory” (1956: 14). The promise H.D. sees in this psychoanalytic world of the undead is the chance to be re-written by ghosts: “I do not want to become involved in the strictly historical sequence. I wish to recall the impressions, or rather *I wish the impressions to recall me*. Let the impressions come in their own way, make their own sequence” (14). This recursion of psychic impressions arising from and yet creating the subject allegorize the undead of the surging hosts, dead to history yet alive to creation and song.

A hermeneutics of “the nonlinear nature of memory and forgetting,” making and unmaking, informs the whole of H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, George Hart notes, which “reveals an ‘organic’ structure,” in the form of a “feedback loop” (165). Unlike most critics, who have attempted to read a resolution—for better or for worse—into the Helen-self who emerges, dazed, at the end of the poem, Hart sees a “‘non-ending’ [that], more than deferring closure or avoiding formal definition, turns the whole poem back to the beginning of the heroic sequence” (174). Memory and its psychic translation feed information back into the system, rheostatically

changing the condition of cognition. Yet, in *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. also presents computationally intransigent data, eternally stored for re-access, as a threatening limit. Helen tries to articulate that “I am awake, no trance, / though I move as one in a dream” (43). Her only reliable form of experience seems to be memory—as she moves backwards in time, “reality opened before me, / I had come back” (116). For a memory, however, the eternal present is precisely that past temporal moment of its inscription. Helen continually struggles to articulate the paradox of her existence as memory-trace, as virtual data in a state of unread potential: “I am awake, no trance, / though I move as one in a dream” (43). Her only reliable form of experience seems to be memory—moving backwards in time.

Helen seems lost in a misplaced, inexplicable, and deeply material memory unaccounted for by myth, making “meanderings back and forth, / till I leaned by rote / the intimate labyrinth // that I kept in my brain.” As stratified multiplicity of historical versions, “superimposed on the hieroglyphs is the ‘marble and silver’ of her Greek thought and fantasy” in which Helen’s own substance consists (264). Her discussions with Theseus, who most critics agree stands for Freud, tries to persuade her to “disappear into the web, / the shell, re-integrate, / nor fear to recall” (170), but Helen is equally afraid to forget *and* to recall. “*She is both phantom and reality,*” states the narrator at the epic’s beginning, yet it is implied that, while Helen has crossed Lethe, “Helen, mysteriously transposed... does not want to forget” (3). “Helen in Egypt did not taste of Lethe, forgetfulness, on the other hand; she was in an ecstatic or semi-trance state” (109).

H.D. creates an uncanny poetic structure of internal meta-commentary by alternating italicized prose captions with lyrics in the mode of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, made even more strange by the fact that the caption often cites (using quotation marks) lyric lines that have not yet been spoken, and that occur in the lyric that follows. One prose caption asserts “*the dream is over.*

*Remembrance is taking its place,”* while the lyric that follows contends in rhetorical chiasmus, “I remember a dream that was real” (109-110). H.D., making use of this strange structure of internal meta-commentary represented by the prose sections, moves into the next lyrical passage. The lyric is formally thereby positioned as the form of expression belonging to the *non-trance*, in an interesting reversal. Has a hieroglyphic form of remembrance “taken the place” of trance? Remembrance is hypothesized as both a taking-place (event) *and* as a substitution, a usurping, simulacral enactment. H.D.’s unsolvable riddle reveals a terminological incoherence within the epistemology of consciousness. Theseus, as Freud, confronts a similar problem: of Achilles, he concludes “in a dream, he woke you, / you were awake in a dream” (157).

The precognition of the italicized prose narration—both citing from and conflicting with the lyrics that follow—installs the structure of the palinode (counter-song) but at an angle oblique to narrative. Computationally speaking, the division between memory (lyric) and operating system (prose) pretends to recursive enumerability, as lyric memory-traces become data for the synthesis of prose. However, this poetic algorithm fails the halting-problem: its program cannot come to the end of its procedure and, in the final caption, we are told “*One greater than Helen must answer, though perhaps we do not wholly understand the significance of the Message*” (303). At times it seems Helen will be lost forever in this liminal state “out of time or beyond moon-time,” in “the ‘widening star circles’” (200). Indeed, the temporality Helen describes herself inhabiting verges on the inhuman, perhaps even the computational, where, as a cultural informational pattern, she would “encompass.../ time, in the crystal, / in my thought here” (201). By the book’s end, Helen’s journey through epistemologically nonviable states of being (as memory, as writing) illuminates memory’s predicament as it attempts to read itself: *the predicament of writing is that it aspires to consciousness*.

Recounting her year of analysis with Freud in *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. describes how the dream-work is as prone to mutation as “the books we read... letters or ideas may run askew on the page... letters that don’t of necessity ‘spell’ anything” and the dream-lines resemble “a crack on a bowl that shows the bowl or vase may at any moment fall in pieces” (92-93). H.D. refers to “these shapes, line, graphs, the hieroglyph of the unconscious” as the thread Freud used to inaugurate “study of this vast, unexplored region. He... deplored the tendency to fix ideas too firmly.... It is true he himself started to decipher or decode the vast accumulation of the material... each the carved symbol of an idea or a deathless dream” (93).

Psychoanalysis and poetry: these “deathless dreams” seem to hang on the same thread of language, all the more obviously contingent as language itself becomes technologically outmoded. Yet it was psychoanalysis that discovered the principle of linguistic-associational thought structuring the unconscious, a principle that the later technicians of machine translation hope to exploit. Vannevar Bush, pioneer of the memex (internet prototype), declares that “selection by association, rather than by indexing” will make it mechanically possible “to beat the mind decisively in regard to the permanence and clarity of the items resurrected from storage” (32). By now, the mind has been decisively beaten at its own memory game; however, what has not yet been achieved is the machine translators’ dream to develop an algorithmic language that could translate without waste. Norbert Wiener professes the promise of “a new generation of engineers familiar with the notion of a communication addressed to a machine rather than to a person” (153), a notion of communication “which takes full cognizance of the possibilities of communication between machine and machine” and which was generated through Wiener’s work in World War II on the problem of anti-aircraft fire control (153). The age of computationally mediated communication begins by a simple change in the structure of

human address. This suggests a significant bias underlying vast technological infrastructure: a desire to circumvent human language's hassles. Language that appears upon command at the level of interface is located nowhere within the architecture of the database. Language's own "fatalistic orbit" in the human mind has, in fact, become what evolutionary biologists would call a vestigial structure. Yet might language transcend mere operational obstacle?

We have now become so familiar with "the notion of a communication addressed to a machine rather than to a person" that it may be difficult now to imagine communication without this paradigm. Perhaps the ancient literate world found it similarly difficult to imagine a time when speech could do something other than utterly vanish. Harold Innis, in 1950, attempting one of the first "media archaeologies" by measuring historical empires in proportion to the efficiency of communication, posited the profundity of political and social change effected once "the art of writing provided man with a transpersonal memory. Men were given an artificially extended and verifiable memory of objects and events not present to sight or recollection" (9-10). This state of affairs inaugurated an age of communication addressed to a person who was not present.

According to Innis's thesis, "The monarchies of Egypt and Persia, the Roman empire, and the city-states, were essentially products of writing" (10). These political units came into being once "[r]ecords and messages displaced the collective memory." Moreover, he adds, at this time "Poetry was written and detached from the collective festival" (10).

Cognizant of the de-personalizing tendencies of recorded language, H.D. writes of her time with Freud:

I could not have trusted myself to say the words. They were there. They were singing. They went on singing like an echo of an echo in a shell—very far away yet very near—the very shell substance of my outer ear...and inside the skull, the curled, intricate, hermit-like mollusk, the brain-matter itself. (H.D. 1956: 90)

Through Freud, H.D. comes to see brain-matter as medium for unresearchable echoes, real as history. “I did not have to recall the words, I had not written them” (90). Her later Helen, whom words themselves recall, initially trusts of the written record that “the pictures never will fade, / while one neophyte is left/...to relate the graven line / to a fact, graven in memory” (66). Here we must remember that H.D.’s Helen is primarily a translation and recreation of Euripides’s Helen. According to Innis, this Helen’s continued existence as a stable textual memory is under threat at the time of Euripides: “[t]he audience had lost faith in social life and the power of the oral tradition began to wane,” Innis explains. “The spread of writing contributed to the collapse of Greek civilization by widening the gap between the city-states,” Innis postulates, owing to the alphabet’s great adaptability to vernacular language, which in turn “weakened the possibilities of uniformity and enhanced the problems of government with fatal results to large-scale political organization” (80, 83, 84).

If Euripides’s plays do contain a trace of historical response to writing technology’s effects on modes of social relationality, then H.D.’s Helen contains this trace twice over: H.D.’s Helen stands at the crossroads of writing technologies’ power to unite and disunite a people through the conveyance of their language. At the same time, within an updated context of Cold War developments in linguistic technology, H.D.’s Helen stands not only for writing’s unpredictable volatility but also for a phase change that technology has brought to language itself, a change that recasts language as operation, instrument, and action as opposed to record, expression, and relation. What Helen soon discovers, however, is that, while “she herself is the writing,” that writing itself is mortal.

Cipher, Wound, Trace: Language as a History of Translation

“Memory is the epic faculty par excellence,” Walter Benjamin asserted in 1936, already lamenting the death of the Story and the rise of the cult of Information (153). Only ten years later, nascent cyberneticists declare human memory an obstacle to the species. As Vannevar Bush puts it, mankind’s civilization is “so complex that he needs to mechanize his records more fully if he is to push his experiment to its logical conclusion and not merely become bogged down part way there by overtaxing his limited memory” (38). What *is* this “logical conclusion” of humanity’s experiment with writing?

Built into Freud’s own conception of the stratified layers of the mind is a historically inflected operating capacity of the memory-systems. Conjecturing as to why interlocking yet discrete psychic systems exist, as opposed to the continuous intelligence of incessant self-presence, Freud writes to Fliess in 1896, “I should like to emphasize the fact that the successive registrations represent the psychical achievement of successive epochs of life” (*SE* I: 235). Freud’s soul-machine consists of a bestiary of outmoded mental forms, yoked together, operating at cross-purposes, and surviving into modernity in an uneasy, animal alliance. Perception-neurons *without* memory are parasitized by neurons whose distinctive defect is their inevitable retention of a trace: the first registration. Perception-indicators are thus parasitized by the unconscious system’s needlessly derivative, disorganized, and proliferating re-inscriptions. Finally, the verbal traces structuring pre-conscious operations fail to collaborate with their unconscious host, an epiphytically involved with unresearchable, derivative inscriptions.

From the delusional détente of these incompatible but synchronically symbiotic psychic epochs, an even more quixotic epiphyte arises: consciousness. How was this zoological chimera of amoeba-mind, eel-mind, and rat-mind brought into any form of psychic exchange? “At the frontier between two such epochs,” Freud delineates, “*a translation* of the psychical material



must take place” (*SE* I: 235). This is not a mere exchange of energy; rather, conforming to an architecture endemically polyglot, it is in the very stratification of the mind’s plural histories that psychic *translation* facilitates a living exchange, a communication that doubles rather than extracts information. Stitched together by translations, the evolutionary past’s incompatible apparatus inexplicably produces a memory-system, and then, thought. Freud calls repression’s action “*a failure of translation*” (my emphasis, *SE* I: 235). Consciousness, as Freud will later theorize, consists of whatever material has *not* been subjected to repression; while its content is the non-repressed, its form is given by its ability to say, or, rather, *to have said* “No”: while “in analysis we *never* discover a ‘no’ in the unconscious,” the unconscious can make its way into the conscious *if* it allows itself first to be marked by the sign of negation.<sup>82</sup> Consciousness only ever exists, therefore as an incomplete translation. Marked by translation’s intermittent failures, conscious thought is thus a corrupted draft of the third order (from  $\phi$ - to  $\psi$ - to  $\omega$ ). Moreover, repressed material, as “failures of translation,” may make an entry into consciousness *if* marked as such—marked, that is, *as failed*.

Theorists of translation have often noted that translation involves even in its own etymology an element of “betrayal”: Romance languages each retain some trace of the Italian adage “traddutore—traditore” [“translators—traitors”]. H.D.’s 1926 novel *Palimpsest*, follows a Greek translator and scholar, Hipparchia, who has been pressed into concubinage by Roman imperial colonialism; she describes her experience translating Sappho’s Greek into Roman: “In uncertain light, she reconsidered her fervid rendering... The translation in the heavier language read faulty, repetitive.” Its failure both a betrayal and a negative form of survival, translation’s dealings with the colonizer’s language “was the dark sputtering of an almost extinguished wick in an earth bowl” (72). Which is the greater betrayal, Hipparchia wonders: to corrupt the text for

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<sup>82</sup> See “Negation”[Die Verneinung] from 1925 (*SE* XIX: 235-39; *GW* XIV; emphasis mine; *SE* XIX: 239).

survival or to let the text fall silent? “Sappho in Latin. ... It was desecration to translate it. // She decided not to re-render the hyacinth on the mountain side.... She would quote it entire in Greek. The Greek words, inset in her manuscript, would work terrific damage” (73). As H.D.’s translator theorizes the vengeful damage of the untranslatable, she refers not only to its apotropaic authenticity; instead, “she saw the mind so diabolic in its cunning that long dead poems could yet remake a universe” (H.D. 1968: 73) Freud’s dream, H.D.’s Hipparchia, H.D.’ Helen: all are translations whose success depends on an art of betrayal. Whom do they betray?

On oneiric translation, Freud writes, “We regard the dream thoughts and the dream content as two representations of the same meaning in two different languages; ...the dream content appears to us as a transmission [Übertragung] of the dream thoughts into another form of expression, whose signs and laws of composition [Fügungsgesetze] we are to learn by comparing the original with the translation [Übersetzung]” (1913: 260; *GW* 2/3: 283-4). Freud alludes to methods of comparative translation made famous by the Rosetta stone’s hieroglyphic decipherment. In this method, Champollion back-translated two of the stone’s three languages—Ancient Greek, into Coptic (or Ptolemaic Egypt’s demotic)—in order to progress next from Coptic into the hitherto inscrutable, “unresearchable” script of the hieroglyphs. “The dream content is, as it were, presented in a picture-writing, whose signs are to be translated [zu übertragen sind] one by one into the language of the dream thoughts,” ,” proposes Freud, aligning the psychoanalyst’s work with the dreamer’s, as well as with translator’s treacherous task (1913: 260; *GW* 2/3 283-4).

Pointing out the importance of translation for Freud’s oneirocriticism, Dianne Chisholm suggests that “H.D. adapts the semiotics and hermeneutics of Freudian translation to her poetic practice” (5). Hieroglyphs are one shared fascination constructing the affinity between Freud and

H.D., allowing them to translate their ideas into each other's methodological languages. H.D. went to Egypt in 1923 for the excavation of Tutankhamen's tomb to study hieroglyphs, and these hieroglyphs turn up in *Helen in Egypt*'s translation epic, a dreamscape to be read not only with Freud but also beside advances in encryption, information, and artificial consciousness. While H.D.'s Helen wants to be left alone to "study and decipher / the indecipherable Amen script," the events of the poem do not let her remain isolated in her translation (21); Freud, too, is not satisfied only to "decipher" the script of dreams. *The Interpretation of Dreams* evinces a note of deep ambivalence surrounding the status of oneiric translation, providing insight into the nature of the exchange between H.D.'s and Freud's hieroglyphs. Freud's ambivalence toward translation, as methodological metaphor and as assertion of psychic fact, comprises the site where several features of Freud's research converge: first, the notion of memory as unlocatably plural traces of time; second, the notion of the psychic apparatus' discrete systems; third, the historical-epoch thesis of these systems' developmental stratification and partially impaired cooperation; fourth, consciousness conceived as a highly corrupted, tendentious recension of experience; and finally, the premise that there are separate forms of representation in the mind, giving rise to Freud's uncertainty as to whether communication between psychic systems counts as "transmission" (Übertragung) or "translation" (Übersetzung).

The logical merger which could keep all five of these notions operating coherently was the thesis that developed first in the crucible of hysteria: initially, hysterics brought the history of language to bear on the mute demands of the present. Hysterics, for Freud, were seen to have "restored" to words their original sense. Soon after, the dream itself became the universal stage of this philological recovery. As he describes later in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud discovered that dreams return us "to phases in our intellectual development which we have

long outgrown—to hieroglyphic writing, to symbolic connections, possibly to conditions which existed before the language of thought was evolved. On this account we called the form of expression employed by the dream-work archaic or regressive.” Here, we hear again the speculation from *Studies in Hysteria* that hysterics may not derive their symbolic symptoms from the speech in everyday use (Sprachgebrauch), but rather that, collaborating with speech, they draw on an older, shared wellspring.

H.D. admires that Freud “dared to say that the dream came from an unexplored depth in man’s consciousness and that this unexplored depth ran like a great stream or ocean underground... overflowing in man’s small consciousness, produced inspiration, madness, creative idea” (1956: 71). This language of the common wellspring originates, in *Helen in Egypt*, “things remembered, forgotten, // remembered again, assembled / and re-assembled in different order / as thoughts and emotions” (289) Yet, precariously, this language of common wellspring is neither system nor substance; the dream is a treacherous translator. “The part played by words in the formation of dreams ought not to surprise us,” writes Freud. For Freud, the word’s being “a knotting-point for a number of conceptions, it possesses, so to speak, a predestined polysemy” (trans. altered 1913: 315). Predestined to mean too much, language’s precipitates are subject to the Lucretian swerve, as networks of mutation and exchange stream through the human psyche. The mind’s chimerical systems are echoed in language’s own unbridled combinatrix, its dream-work “process of translation” that ceaselessly renders dream-thoughts “into another script or language.”

The mind’s chimera of patched together systems is matched by language’s unbridled combinatrix, as dream-work, “this process of translation,” ceaselessly renders dream-thoughts “into another script or language” by “the means of blending and combining.” The dream-work is

both a regression to the archaic, *and* the source of (re)creation. Yet where the task of the literary translator is “to respect the distinctions observed in the text, and especially to differentiate between things which are similar but not the same; the dream-work, on the contrary, strives to condense two different thought by selecting, after the manner of wit, an ambiguous word which can suggest both thoughts” (1943: 153). The dream poses a problem parallel to one the machine translators stumbled across while programming for linguistic association. They found that “like the sorcerer’s apprentice,” the mechanical translator “is unable to desist. It will continue to translate even when not required.” Ironically returned, in this paradox, to the “Tower” of Anti-Babel, the machine translators warn that “when [the computer] encounters proper name... the readers must be prepared for Tours to come out as turn/tower (plural) and for Mr. Kondo to appear as Mr. Near-Wisteria” (Richens/Booth 1955: 35). In fact, by algorithmic detour, machine translation had accidentally rediscovered dream-language’s predestination and double identity: cipher one minute, referent the next. Language, operating alternatively between inscription and index, sometimes refers and sometimes defers.

Freud’s insight into the hermeneutics of this dream-work was to see that the synchronic problem of language’s “predestined polysemy” could be solved by a diachronic, historicizing approach. From *The Interpretation of Dreams* onwards, Freud recognizes that the dream-work, partaking in the work of encryption, must be treated as a betrayal: a corrupted translation of intent, a decipherable obliquity of expression. “This betrayal can still be overcome, for the dream-work presents “no greater difficulties to their translators than do the ancient hieroglyphic scripts” (*SE* V: 341). The betrayal constituted by the dream shares in the betrayal common to all language. Like the script of the hieroglyph, the dream’s betrayal presents difficulties not so much because it willfully obfuscates, but because of the fact that the key has not survived. The dream

is not inscrutable, *it is unresearchable*: it can only be understood through comparison to systems of writing alien to its own. *The trace that language is* exists in the mind as trace of uncountably corrupted translations—the corruption from perception-to-memory transcription, as well as from the transpersonal history of translation that founds and confounds language. The dream, trace or *trait* of language as the history of translation{traducteur—traître}, does not encipher its aims so much as it finds itself struggling to *be-trait* them.

The dream, the desire of memory to be-trait itself to the subject, resorts to strangely paradoxical methods: in a footnote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that the dream “is so intimately connected with verbal expression that Ferenczi may justly remark that every language has its own dream language. Dreams are, by rule, not translatable [unübersetzbar] into other languages” (1913: 82n). Ironically, dreams are not translatable because they be-trait themselves through their very facility with translation. Their skill with translation is in substituting visual images for the unrepresentably unconscious via linguistic logics. Freud emphatically condemns the “cipher-method” of dream interpretation, in which dreams are parsed as though literally image-encryptions. He disparages this *Chiffriermethode* for its “purely mechanical transference” which “treats the dream as a kind of secret code, in which every sign is translated into another sign of known meaning according to an established key” (1913: 82). For Freud, as for H.D., the “key” has not survived. “Helen achieves the difficult task of translating a symbol in time, into timeless-time or hieroglyph,” only after the point she discovers “the script [is] intuitive” (13). Since she herself is the writing, the dream is what she alone can trace. Just when the poem’s narrator announces that “Helen has found the answer,” Helen rejoins, “No need to untangle the riddle” (192); and we are never told what answer she sees.

Unresearchable by pure decryption, it is only the translator's comparative method that unlocks the dream. This labor resists the paradigm of humanity's "innate interest in coding and decoding" which, according to Norbert Wiener, is the most "specifically human" trait (85). Instead, we must take a non-human interest in the dream, returning to the dream as the product of an apparatus. We must treat the dream as a non-human archive that contains "a world of signals that operate beyond and below the cultural symbolism intended by the humans involved." This non-human interest "dispassionately pays attention to the subconscious qualities of technical media"—a "sorcery" or semiomancy of symbols that can only be defined "by the most abstruse hieroglyphs or the most simple memories" (Ernst, 242; H.D. 1961: 297). Freud, abjuring the cipher-method, found his greatest challenge in the question of the "symbol," a phenomenon both he and the Jungian school found crucial to the dream-work. But where Jung outlines stable symbolic archetypes indwelling a collective unconscious, Freud scorns oneiric ciphers, which he compares to mechanistic technology: the "signets of stenography," which Freud sees as fostering hermeneutic desire for "once and for all fixated meaning." Yet Freud's solution is a "genetic Nature" guiding symbolization: "That which, today, presents a symbolic unity, was in ancient times most likely united by conceptual and verbal identity. Symbolization appears to be a ruined vestige and marker [Rest und Merkzeichen] of earlier identity" (GW II/III: 357)

This early chapter in psychoanalysis' development of the notion of *Ur-Sprache* has been discussed by John Forrester in *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis*. Forrester explains the attraction of a theory of archaic language for Freud, since "for all its emphasis on language as an independent system, psychoanalysis is continually threatened by a nominalistic theory of language" in which the prefix "Ur-" is the only way to fix the infinite regression of meaning" (130). Of the crucial yet subtle negotiations made by Freud over the importance of archaic

language and symbolization, Forrester shows how Freud admits “the unitary past has a certain indeterminate but necessary relation to the plural present... the stock of symbols, the relic of a spark of linguistic creativity that lies outside of history, now provides an alternative to the diversity of association, the bricolage of the dreamer” (119). In the end, “Freud found the origins and the nature of language as the alternative to a conception of the symbol”; Forrester sees Freud’s exclusion of image-symbolism’s more capricious rubrics as a way to gain “universalism without arbitrariness,” using this philological solution of the archive to trump the cipher-method’s “monotonous and dreary translations” (122,118).

H.D. praises Freud’s notion that dream-language belongs “not only of the living but of those ten thousand years dead. The picture-writing, the hieroglyph of the dream, was the common property of the whole race; in the dream, man, as at the beginning of time, spoke a universal language” (1956: 71). Yet as we see in her *Helen in Egypt*, this “common property” is also vulnerable to appropriation. Freud’s “ruined vestige” of a dissolved unity undergoes, through translation’s dream-work, the slow apocalypse of reference. For Freud, as for Helen, the symbol is the remains, not the synthesis, of archaic language.

Wiener writes, “It is the purpose of Cybernetics to develop a language and techniques that will enable us indeed to attack the problem of control and communication [in which]...we are always fighting nature’s tendency to degrade the organized and to destroy the meaningful” (17). H.D. and Freud also create methods counterpoised to language’s predestined forgetting. But where cybernetics would “restore” the “simplicity and power” of the fantasy of universal language, H.D. and Freud pursue a different thermodynamics of language, attending to what it must be-treat in order to survive. “The history of language when looked at from the purely grammatical point of view is little other than the history of corruptions,” writes T.R. Lounsbury



in his *History of the English Language*—a contemporary to the *Interpretation of Dreams*.<sup>83</sup>

These corruptions are not the products of negligence, so much as inherent in the nature of language: language, as a history of translation. For the “ruined vestiges” of this unintentional dissolution, the translation-apparatus of both Freud’s method and H.D.’s poetics jointly propose a philosophy of language.

H.D.’s Helen, in her disappointed efforts to uncover any totalizing narrative locked within the script that surrounds her, finds herself released to contemplation. She meditates on the survival of unresearchable fragments, just as “a man will wait hours on the wharf / for some chance unexpected thing, / the simple magic coming// from something lost or left over, / or spilled like the ash-of-myrrh / on the Paphos-temple floor,” a parallel of patience to the goddess who receives as an offering “a filigree ring of no worth,/ a broken oar, a snapped anchor chain” (1961: 280-81). In 1937, H.D. explained that “In order to speak adequately of my poetry and its aims, I must you see, drag in a whole deracinated epoch” (1987/8: 72); but this epoch is not the Hellenic idyll her detractors might anticipate. Instead she tells how, walking through a house demolished by artillery in the first World War, she encountered a copy of Robert Browning that the blast had kicked across the floor. Asking us to consider the shock that war of such magnitude does to an epoch, and she makes use of this moment, to explain that Browning’s poems looked neither small or nor meaningless there among the rubble. Rather, “They were in other space, other dimension, never so clear as at that very moment” (72).

“Wenn ich meinem Gedächtnis mißtraue...” (“If ever I mistrust my memory...”) writes Freud, in the first sentence of his “Note upon a ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (SE XIX 227; GW XIV: 3). Freud doubts the superficial, “celluloid” layer of consciousness; he searches the black wax backing of the tablet for scribbles that past writings have unintentionally inscribed. It is an echo

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<sup>83</sup> Quotation taken from Innis, 8.

that reverberates with that most monumental revolution in Western epistemology, “*dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum.*” Descartes, who like Freud, doubts memory, nevertheless dismissed memory as having nothing to contribute to his new project of rational epistemology. Three centuries later, Freud sees in a child’s toy “that has recently come on the market” (much as he saw, in another child’s toy, the riddle of the death drive, fort/da...) a new chapter in the history of the epistemological project of doubt. The damage left in the wax—Descartes’s, Freud’s—also traces or be-traits this history of writing: here, meaning’s tracks exist in “Other dimension,” beyond intentionality: the dimension of imprint, corruption, and unintended survival. “I felt when I came here,” said H.D. of Cornwall, “that the Phoenicians on the track from the mine to the sea... had left an *imprint*, not only the track, past the Druid stones” (emphasis mine 1960: 82). Which is the more significant imprint: that of the object or of the subject?

Media and information theorist and posthumanist N. Katherine Hayles commends us to “correspondences rather than ontologies, entraining processes rather than isolated objects, and codes moving in coordinated fashion across representational media rather than mapping one object onto another.” But if we are in danger now (again?) of believing “that work and text are immaterial constructions independent of the substrates in which they are instantiated,” we may return to the unfinished work, or incomplete translation of the meaning of the machine-mind postulated by Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Hayles 2003: 270). The difference between the soul-apparatus of Freud and the machine translator’s view of language transcends even the issue of “command and control” so important to the cyberneticists and their descendants. Wiener states the yet unresolved problem for machine translation thus: at a certain “stage of translation between the line and the machine,” ... “information may be lost which can never be regained.” Between any two transfers of information, “there will be an act of

translation, capable of dissipating information. *That information may be dissipated but not gained*, is, as we have seen, the cybernetic form of the second law of thermodynamics” (78). The dissipation of information is equally foundational for Freud’s new epistemology. However, unlike the coded relays of informational packets, whenever improper translation occurs in language and the trace of meaning has been lost or dissipated, *something else comes into being*. In the cybernetic paradigm, information sustains pure loss; the machine translators are thus unable to comprehend that language, existing as *a history of translation*, sustains only *impure* loss. This loss allows recreation. Wiener’s cybernetic “translation” is in fact “transmission,” it is the *Übertragung* Freud recognized as affecting memory and language at the level of the signifier. However, for the signified, such psychic transmission suffers loss without impeding translation. Linguistic translation, the *Übersetzung* of Freud’s dream-work, momentarily combines two separate orders. It produces, through its impurity, *new* meaning, not *no* meaning.

Writing about the influence of *Helen in Egypt* on his own writing, Nathaniel Mackey meditates on what he calls H.D.’s most distinctive aesthetic, the palimpsest, in which:

the revealed stratum itself partakes of a draft-like provisionality; differing kinds and degrees of definition and finish merge, coexist. The revealed stratum, in its unequal development, implies and partly reveals other coexistent strata. ... in H.D.’s work, human development is crippled and complicated by the palimpsestic presence of earlier steps along the way (225-26).

This palimpsestic “step” calls to mind not only the stages of Freud’s chimeric memory system, but also the ancient Phoenician presence H.D. saw haunting the coast of Cornwall, vestigial tracks implying another, invisible imprint. Mackay believes that “the ‘desolate coast’ on which Helen and Achilles meet” conjures “dissolute knowledge, repetitive, compulsive knowledge, undulatory, repeatedly undone and reconstituted” (228). Into this “desolate coast,” a physical medium, the poem’s most indelible image is impressed; this image echoes the “step” of palimpsestic translation. At the beginning of *Helen in Egypt*, a reunion between Helen and

Achilles occurs on Alexandria's debris-strewn beach. Helen and Achilles have glimpsed each other before, at the walls of Troy, yet this is to be their first meeting in person. "*It is the lost legions that have conditioned their encounter,*" the narrator asserts (7). This counter-song, in the meta-conscious voice of Helen, asserts:

The harpers will sing forever  
of how Achilles met Helen  
among the shades

but we were not, we are not shadows  
as we walk, heel and sole  
leave our sandal prints in the sand

though the wounded heel treads lightly. (6)

Here, imprints left in the sand testify to the problematic of the *physical* survival of these figures, and their wounds, figures that myth has consigned to the world of shadows. Yet, the image of their tracks leaves both a wound in the landscape (in the sand) and also an *image* of a wound, what Peirce would call the wound's indexical sign. Between the image of this wound and its placement within the landscape (of the afterlife), we can read that Achilles's mortality has at last caught up to him. Achilles's distinguishing heel (the heel that gives him his mortality) signals that he, like Helen, has been "transposed, translated" to the after-life. Yet the spirit-world's shore retains a strangely material mark of what would appear to be a living heel. This heel is also a sign of a previous "failure of translation" within the world of the living: having not been fully immersed in the river Styx, through his mother's carelessness, Achilles is destined to failed immortality. Thus the sand of the afterlife retains the trace of the heel that erased the hero from immortal life.

As the newly-mortal Achilles, "shedding his glory, / limped slowly across the sand," H.D.'s Helen is convinced that Achilles, here authenticated by his wound's signature, has returned to be her true destiny (10). But will Helen transcend her own earlier selves in this

translation? Thinking back on all the memory-traces she has traversed, she begins to believe that instead her memories were all “the flame / of thoughts too deep to remember,” which “like fire / through the broken pictures / on a marble floor” will “break through the legend” without actually crossing its barrier (258). In this struggle with memory, Helen’s virtuality hovers between the unresearchable time of the Freudian memory-trace and writing’s technological future, as computational simultaneity pries apart the divide between “meaningful” writing and writing’s merely technological inscription. Helen’s eidolon-self is an image at this edge of meaninglessness; seeking to transcend her own translations she finds she may neither escape nor survive. Yet Helen’s problem is a warning, not a prescription: Helen the eidolon warns against logics that would by-pass the corrupt generativity of translation in order to transcend the uncertainty of language, pursuing the hermeneutic of metalanguage without remainder.

Helen sees that breaking through the legend can only transpire from a reflexive, mutual reading between Achilles’ and Helen’s two translation-effects. As Achilles stalks around Helen in the after-life, we are told “*they will always be centralized by a moment, ‘undecided yet.’ ... the great ‘frieze, the Zodiac hieroglyph’ come to life with [their] magnetic intensity.*” The implications of the “magnetic” memory that Achilles and Helen constitute is included within the field of the newly invented electromagnetic memory of the computer, still only running—as of yet—provisional calculations for the shape of chaos (meteorology) or the more reliable calculations that could plot the explosions of thermonuclear warheads. The narrator proclaims at the poem’s conclusion that it remains undecided whether or not the wrath-like Achilles and ill-starred Helen—the excuse and occasion for a just war—will be able to engage with each other’s histories. Will they be able to newly corrupt their respective translations, creating from their wounds a new future? “Would they turn and read each other/ or form a frieze”? (271) This

question of Freud's soul-machine, of H.D.'s Helen, and even, perhaps, of Wiener's cybernetics illuminates a self or selves that only ever exist at the boundaries of language's survival. This self that Helen discovers, without transcending, "outlives, as it were, her own destiny" every time her story is sung again—song or counter-song (111). Even as technology tempts us to pursue unambiguous control over language and memory, a world devoid of translation, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* presents an epic poetic staging of a different form of translational restraint. Helen, transposed or translated, encourages us to "turn and read each other."

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### James Merrill's Apparatus Poetics: Poetic Form and Epic Technology in

#### *The Changing Light at Sandover*

“Our writing-tool works with us on our thoughts.”<sup>84</sup>  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

In 1982, immediately following the publication of his poetic epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, James Merrill burned twenty reams of the original transcripts from which the book had been compiled.<sup>85</sup> Twenty reams: which is to say, roughly 10,000 pages of writing—or, automatic writing. These pages were not manuscripts drafts in the normal sense of the term; they were “transcripts,” uninterrupted streams of letters copied down by Merrill’s right hand as his left hand, along with the hand of his partner, David Jackson, moved or “was moved” across the surface of a home-made Ouija board by the improvised planchette of a Willowware tea cup.

Under any criteria of poetic production, a first-draft manuscript exceeding 10,000 pages is an astonishing feat. Thus, the subsequent burning of these pages seems to present, at least to the literary scholar, nothing short of a miniature archival tragedy. Yet the literary “aura” of these original drafts should not obscure the conundrum of how, precisely, these twenty reams of handwriting can be thought to relate to the “final” product of Merrill’s 560 page trilogy. On closer examination, the methods, the techniques, even the home-made writing technology that Merrill and Jackson used to create this book cannot be categorized in any straightforward way. Between draft and transcript, transcript and planchette, planchette and the authors’ sense of

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<sup>84</sup> “Unser Schriebzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken.” This quotation appears in a typewritten letter Nietzsche wrote to Heinrich Köselitz in 1882. See *Nietzsche Briefwechsel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> part, I: 172.

<sup>85</sup> Tim Materer relates this event in *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*; see 159n2.

unseen powers, what remains unresolved—and what demands to be newly considered—is the myth of poetic “origination.” Here, the domain of the literary appears confounded by the realm of the apparatus. The crux of Merrill’s poetic project lies in the unsolvable, inextricable overlap between materiality and figurality in its mode of production.

Does *Sandover* begin where the transcripts ended or was *Sandover* already recognizably “revealed” in the initial event of automatic writing? Should David Jackson should receive some share in the credit?<sup>86</sup> The burning of such a large portion of the transcripts seems forever to preclude our answering these questions. Yet, in fact, it is not the burning of the poetic archive that precludes these answers, but, rather, the ways we have been culturally conditioned to think about the exceptional and singular status of literary origination that short-circuit any attempt to answer this question conventionally. Even if the totality of the transcripts were available, the question of this work’s “lyrical” origin could not be resolved—and indeed it is the *wrong* question. Merrill’s burning of his own archive actively de-authorizes any scholarly return to “originals,” forcing us to confront a different question: how does the *act* of burning of this transcript-archive relate to the remainder, to the survival of the epic’s “finished” product? Merrill’s self-immolation of his archive can be read as an act of negative authorship, de-authorizing a search for origins in order to promote different forms of critical attention. It gestures toward an altered standpoint from which to distinguish production from creation.

The standpoint in question is a specifically historical one: in the second half of the twentieth century, production’s divergence from creation is increasingly accentuated and determined by developments in advanced technology. Merrill’s poetic epic provides glimpses into a hypothetical prehistory of humanity’s nuclear technology, allusively tracing myths of other

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<sup>86</sup> See also *Familiar Spirits*, where Alison Lurie—friend of both Merrill and Jackson—characterizes the epic’s origination as a monumental instance of the collaborative forces of *folie à deux*.



sentient civilizations predating the human. Yet these civilizations, far from offering any prelapsarian wisdom, emerge as premonitory ghosts, haunted by their own histories of self-made apocalypse. Their civilizations had, in their time, discovered nuclear power and used it to their own demise, and their warnings to humanity are intended to promote a social reconsideration of the weaponizing of nature's most profound forces. In this way, the epic's content repeats or prefigures the transcripts' material fate: the burning of the original necessitates a shift in focus away from the question of identifiable origin and towards the question of making, the risks of invention, and the vulnerability of creation as such. This epic traces the fundamental susceptibility of "origination" back to the unexamined partitions between production and creation—*technē* and *poiēsis*. Rethinking epistemologies which dictate strict separation between these realms, *Sandover*'s mode of production seeks to dismantle cultural and philosophical preconceptions about how these terms relate in the realm of poetry and language.<sup>87</sup>

In his introduction to *James Merrill*, an edited volume of criticism on the poet's career, Harold Bloom pronounces Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* to be "an apocalyptic epic whose true starting point is Hiroshima." This 560 page poem, consists of three books published

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<sup>87</sup> Most scholarship on literary responses to the crisis of nuclear technology has focused on the novel form, firstly because of more frequent thematic occurrences, and secondly, I believe, because of a mimetic correlation between rhetorics of nuclear politics and the structural character of the fictional genre: plot, motivations, endings. Among the most recent of these accounts can be found in Daniel Grausam's *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (2011) who maintains that "any fiction that tries to think seriously about the possibility of narrative in the thermonuclear age must be a form of metanarrative that reflects on the very possibility of narrating an event that would leave no narrator" (16). Two decades before Grausam, William Scheick similarly asserts that while "the nuclear referent is a subjective dream," it possesses "the potentiality to kill the dreamer" (80). Those few writings dealing with poetry's response to the nuclear horizon of technology agree that the absence of any unified response is significant, but they tend to read this absence as though it were inevitable. Paul Boyer and Ed Brunner each give reparative suggestions for reading this silence as poetic modesty: Brunner argues that "conceiving of the Bomb begins to fall outside manageable structures" for what poetry's language could ever hope to accommodate (200) and Boyer suggests this reticence signals "not a failure of imagination, but intensity of imagination—not wanting to assimilate the 'monstrous novelty' too soon" (250). John Gery, who does consider Merrill's work as a case study for this larger subject, nevertheless concludes that, in general, "the unique contribution poetry makes to resisting as well as engaging nuclearism is found in its speculative use of language and form more than in its explicit subject matter" (12). For an account of the skewed and largely absent literary response in the years immediately following the end of World War II, see the chapter "Words Fail" in Boyer, 243-56.

consecutively from 1976, 1978, and 1980, published in total in 1982. By setting this poem's "true starting point" several decades before its time, Bloom implies we must read this book's relation to history as characterized by a lack of coincidence between its factual, chronological moment and its "true" moment of origin. What does it mean to assign a "starting point" for an epic about ending points ("apocalypse")? Is "apocalypse" here an unveiling or a fulfillment? Is it the beginning of the (ineluctable) end, or is it the end of all notions that rely on "beginnings"? Merrill's work on *Sandover* began, in fact, "accidentally" in 1955; after this "accident" of contact with a spirit, the work continued for almost three decades, a poetic labor coinciding with the Cold War's duration.<sup>88</sup> We must consider, in reading this epic, the complex relation here imputed between world history and the invention of nuclear warfare, its subject of continual refrain. Here, nuclear holocaust is cast as an event of obliteration that comes to represent both a future *and* the compulsion to repeat a past. But if this "moment" is *Sandover*'s anachronistic beginning, the genre ascribed to it by Bloom contains a second paradox: what is the telos of the "apocalyptic epic"?

Though the "true starting point" for *Sandover* may certainly be seen as Hiroshima, Merrill's work on *Sandover* began factually speaking in 1955, and continued for a span of almost three decades. This poetic labor (not coincidentally, Bloom might argue) coincided almost exactly with the duration of the Cold War. First published as an entire trilogy in 1982, its three separate books were released earlier on their own: the "Book of Ephraim" appeared in the collection, *Divine Comedies*, in 1976; it was composed from transcripts compiled over the longest period of time, dating back to 1955. Composed from Ouija sessions held primarily in the summer of 1976, *Mirabell: Books of Number* appeared in 1978 (and won the National Book

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<sup>88</sup> 1955 is often cited as the starting point because in this year Merrill and Jackson first "made contact" with Ephraim, their spirit-guide (Bauer, 219). However, Merrill did not consider turning the sessions into an epic until much later. For other mediumistic influences and events, see Yenser, 253-63.

Award). *Scripts for the Pageant* was completed after the sessions of 1977 and appeared in 1980. Further complicating the date of this work's production is the fact that, although work on the "Book of Ephraim" could be said to have begun almost accidentally in August of 1955, that this material might consist in the starting point of an epic "trilogy" was not something Merrill even considered until much later. 1955, as a starting point, was the year in which Merrill and his partner David Jackson first "made contact" through a Ouija board with Ephraim, the spirit-guide who would be with them for many years to come (Bauer, 219).<sup>89</sup>

These undecidable questions of when this work, or any work, properly "begins", are what Bloom's remark insists that we consider and reconsider—not just through the question of the biographical (did Merrill *mean* to start the epic?) but more saliently through the question of the historical. "An apocalyptic epic whose true starting point is Hiroshima." How can we think of the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima as in any way a "starting point"? What could it mean to dwell on a "starting point" in an epic whose subject is, ostensibly, ending points ("apocalypse")? Is "apocalypse" here an unveiling or a fulfillment? Is it the beginning of the (ineluctable) end, or is it the end of all notions that rely on "beginnings"? If we are to think this problem apart from any determinism, it will be crucial to think history through a method of radical anachronism. Radical anachronism will differentiate itself from facile anachronism in that, through the latter, a remark such as Bloom's could only be valued, from a contemporary standpoint, as symptom of an incomplete, invalidated history. Writing in 1985, Bloom's remark was made near the end point of the Cold War, and yet this end point, however close it now appears in hindsight, was not necessarily visible on the contemporary horizon. That same year, the Warsaw Pact had been signed for a twenty year extension by its members. Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the U.S.S.R. in 1985, yet perestroika would not be discussed until the following

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<sup>89</sup> For an account of other early mediumistic attempts and influences, see Yenser, 253-63.

year, and glasnost was still three years away. President Reagan's second term in office had just begun, after a first term spent re-escalating the tensions between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. through covert C.I.A. operations of military interference, development of the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"), and speeches in which he promised to put the Soviet Union in the "ash-heap of history."

Refusing, then, to decide when this work, or any work, properly "begins" means we must equally reconsider its relation to the question of the historical. Merrill works to avoid freezing the poetic inquiry of *Sandover* into becoming a mere artifact of the Cold War. As such, its value would remain limited to offering a cultural document of its time. To read this epic, we must continue to ask the questions *Sandover* poses: questions about nuclear technology, of technology's relation to the history of humanity *as* a history of invention, and the relation between invention and language. The end of the Cold War does not annul the question of whatever might have "begun" in Hiroshima. *Sandover's* conversation with a succession of spirits constructs an uncanny counter-history designed to offer a premonitory fable of restraint. The true starting point of earth's coming apocalypse, we discover, is not only "to come," but is already done and gone. *Sandover's* premise is a conversation with a succession of spirits who tell the story of past civilizations on earth, each of which ended with nuclear apocalypse for tampering with atomic energy in a quest for ultimate power. Through the board, the ghost-characters tell stories of earth's past civilizations: these civilizations (of other species) each developed nuclear technologies that eventually led to their species' apocalypse, and the rise of another species to dominance in their place. Merrill and Jackson are instructed by their spirit interlocutors as to how, 500 million years ago, "URANIUM FISSION WRECKED THE GREENHOUSE" (116). Having once unleashed the "POWER TO SUCK THE EARTH / EGG

TO AN O... THE WHOLE FRAIL EGGSHELL /...IMPLoding,” it becomes clear that the apocalyptic question is not how to prevent it, but how not to repeat it (453). What threatens to be repeated, as Merrill and Jackson learn, are the technological errors of human prehistory. While these past civilizations are fictional, Merrill’s allegory still encompasses detonations of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suggesting that these events are neither finalizable nor finite. The “new” threat of nuclear holocaust, for which the world can never adequately prepare (despite all preparations), in its ideological apotheosis of novelty, becomes both the policy that threatens to replace politics *and* the impossibility of this policy’s suspension. As “ultimate” endpoint, it inscribes finitude into transcendence and implicates the man-made within the total unmaking of man. This framework of nuclear politics raises the question, beyond origination, of we must *not* invent: of originations we must *not* achieve.

The spirits speak of how humanity’s species-specific possibility for apocalypse “IN YR AGE... BEGAN AD 1934,” that is, with the inception of the Manhattan Project, a warning that in fact apocalypse is already underway (116). This poetic epic, as prophecy, thus begins thus *in medias res*. *Mirabell*, the epic’s second section, begins with an epigraph from the scene of Einstein’s historical recommendation for the Manhattan Project: “For the first time in history, men will use energy that does not come from the sun” (94). This swerve away from the solar order of things is a swerve into the man-made: and, most importantly, into the unknown and unimaginable. Near the end of the trilogy, the spirit guides become witnesses to an underground nuclear explosion. They narrate how:

During the countdown we touch Earth, sink then  
Beneath it. Mummied rivers dry as bone,  
Tamped towns, lost species, in an earthenware  
Terrine of suffocation, layer on layer (456).

Here moving down through the earth is not only moving back in time, through its geological layers, it is also moving back to the future. Underground unfolds an experiment in the future that the angels are trying to prevent through their epic warning against nuclear technology. This descent through earth as an ascent through allegorical time is later revisited, as the spirits connect fossil fuels and the “SHADOW RICHES” of nuclear ore through a metaphor for the process of time running through an hourglass: man stands on a “RISING DUNE” of ecological devastation and desertification, as well as on the metaphorically fallen grains of sand that measure time. As we are warned of “SAND RUNNING UP, DEEP FUELS TAPPD,” the spirits suggest it will be difficult to “HOLD BACK A RESERVOIR OF SPENT TIME” which echoes the dangerous spent time of atomic waste (475).

Witnessing the underground detonation of the bomb, the spirits refer to its luminosity as “metaphor- / Shattering light” (457). After the blinding flash that we now associate with nuclear weapons, it seems that light’s power to metaphorize, to exist as “figuration”—of enlightenment, of truth—has been annulled. It is no longer possible to simply signify salvation, reason, or benevolence through association with the figure of light. Merrill’s epic does not look for a way back to the sun; instead it looks away from revelatory traditions of oracular poetics in which language may once have seemed to gleam with the light of *logos*. Instead, he looks toward language embedded in the dimension of process and time. He looks to the dimension of language that connects it to the apparatus, to the machine, to automation. The way that Merrill positions his “authorial” experience of automatic writing will be the subject of this chapter, in which I will show how Merrill’s *literalizing of technology*—his experimenting with a “technology” of the letter—engages precisely those dimensions of production that technology purports to manage and circumvent: the accidental, the flawed, the undecidable. The cosmic dictum or structuring

assertion of “NO ACCIDENT is repeated over and over throughout this epic, but what this means is heavily qualified. According to the myth of the epic, accident is the salt of life that was “added” to creation after the fall of the first two, more mechanical worlds through their nuclear inventions. The “God” figure of the epic (a mythic abstraction for “biology,” given the name “God B”) decides that “HENCEFORTH ACCIDENT WD BE A TOOL” (194) rather than a flaw in creation. This tool, moreover, is one distinctive tool of epic: one of epic’s most definitive characteristics lies in its lengthy train of accidents that seem on the surface to obstruct narrative resolution, all while engaging the audience’s interest in a serial way. The epic’s art of accident and *dérive* may even begin from an apocalyptic point of departure, such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Merrill’s *Sandover* is in conversation with this epic tool of accident, yet he displaces accident’s use as device of plot, and recasts it as both subject of argument and prosodic device, as seen above. In addition, *Sandover* can be considered an “epic” for its claim to consideration of a vast historical scope (beginning 500 million years ago up through to the present); and for sheer duration of its prophetic “revelation”—560 written pages, tens of thousands of transcript pages, decades of nightly séances.

Yet this poetic “product,” framed by the genre proper to mythic time, proceeds to challenge the *myth* of literary production through vatic inspiration, organic lyricism, and the linguistic exceptionality of the human. In doing so, Merrill’s work aligns with a growing philosophical awareness, dating from the preceding century, that relations between the signifier and the psyche might not be those of reliable expressivity. He elaborates on what it means to see language not as a problem of thought but a problem *mediation*. Merrill’s poetic experiment philosophically suspends the possibility of hermeneutics, exposing (human) cognition as fundamentally a question of automatic writing. Yet in exposing the “automatic” ground of

poetic, linguistic cognition in this way, Merrill also transcodes the technological notion of automatism, with its earlier and paradoxically antonymic valences. The genealogy of the αὐτόματος [*automatos*] reveals the notion of the “involuntary” coexisting with that of the “spontaneous.” It reveals that which moves “of itself” *and* that which moves without apparent cause. From the beginning, the αὐτό - ματος is poised between the self-moving and the self-thinking (-ματος), which is to say: on the borderline between efficacy and agency.

Certainly in the postwar period of the twentieth century, this indeterminacy of the automatic had taken on horrific proportions, through the threat of global nuclear warfare as well as through the way in which mechanized efficiency attributed to the massive scale of racial holocausts. Even as advanced industrial technology produced higher standards of living for the Cold War’s “first world,” it had become clear that one could not ignore Herbert Marcuse’s claim that once technological rationality becomes synonymous with political rationality, technology’s alleged neutrality must be contested more than ever. If not, the world will become “the stuff of total administration, which absorbs even the administrators,” producing its new rationality of domination as “pure and applied operationalism” (Marcuse, 169, 156). Looking towards a future in which spontaneous, self-thinking techniques threatened to succumb to involuntary, self-moving technocracy, Merrill’s poetic project eschews the fiction of origin in order to excavate that which in thought is “self”-moving (language). In doing so, *The Changing Light at Sandover* explicitly confronts the self-thinking powers of *technē*: its hazards; its doubt.

### The Mechanics of Prophecy

“Our writing-tool works with us on our thoughts.” This line, taken from a letter written by Nietzsche in 1882, introduces a new stage in philosophy’s consideration of the automatism of



writing—as Friedrich Kittler argues in *Grammaphone, Film, Typewriter*. Nietzsche is, as Kittler notes, the first philosopher to make use of that technology of automatic writing: the typewriter. His health failing, his eyesight frequently impaired, Nietzsche found his writing rejuvenated by the aid of this writing machine; in his speculations about the machine’s powers of *mit-schreiben* and *mit-denken* (“writing/thinking with”) he joins the first philosophers of the writing-tool, *das Schreib-Zeug* in the age of technology. When the writing tool begins to be seen to work with us on our thoughts, when the writing utensil is first seen to begin to work with the philosopher to produce philosophy, an old question must be asked anew: where is the locus of thought’s origination? Again, and yet newly, the possibility emerges that thought may have not locus but, rather, process—not locus, but locomotion (Latin: “self-moving”). When the tools of writing begin to work with us toward thought’s origination, the origination of thought can be finally seen as a product of action more than a product of essence.

Whatever the effect on Nietzsche’s subsequent philosophy, his observation that “the writing-tool works with us on our thoughts” bears inside it its own question about the nature of thought’s relation to “truth.” Once “truth” appears subsumed entirely under the category of “product,” the metaphysical distinction between truth and *fact* collapses. This new fact or “facticity” of truth accentuates its etymological sense of “having-been made” (Latin: “factus”). Thoughts, having-been-made-alongside the writing tool, become a product of the *Schreibzeug*, a finite species of fact. For Nietzsche, then, we might conjecture that philosophy becomes “the fact of willing in the age of the writing-device.” While the typewriter (*Schreibzeug*: “writing-implement”) will later be renamed “*Schreibmaschine*” (writing-machine), in 1882 the typewriter still has yet to be recognized as “machine.” Thus, it hovers at the conceptual halfway point between tool and machine, between object and objectified process. It is an apparatus, a device, a

contraption. The work of this object, this apparatus, is work that we may say the subject is unwilling as yet wholly to relinquish. The subject has not yet abandoned the object to its autonomous, locomotive workings. We might say that the writing apparatus is the not yet abandoned writing machine. In this same spirit, we may see Merrill's Ouija-board as a *Schreibzeug*: an unforsaken device.

The human agent of this writing-apparatus still shares responsibility for its productions. But this responsibility, now a shared responsibility, is also a responsibility in question. Not yet a purely "automated" machine, the *Schreibzeug*, in its apparatus incarnation, does not yet present its writing with the technological neutrality of the "having-been-made." The writing apparatus still presents its writing as the made-alongside. The hand-made. The locus of its writing production is double, but not binary: it is plural, non-reducible. There is not yet the all-or-nothing of the writing machine. The material differences between machine and apparatus are not the sufficient condition for their differentiation. They are differentiated, in the final instance, by the perspective that governs or shapes their mode of use. These historical moments of differentiation can establish a provisional (re)definition of the apparatus in contradistinction to the machine. While a machine is governed by the desired projection of reliable outcomes, the apparatus may be conceived of as an unscripted sharing: between thought and thing, subject and object, agent and process. The outcomes of the machine, we might say, are formulated as answers. The sharing that characterizes the apparatus, at its root, preserves unresolvable questions as to the product. The apparatus reopens the question of creation, while the machine seeks to foreclose it.

Written near the end of the First World War, Guillaume Apollinaire's "The New Spirit and the Poets" celebrates a new "encyclopedic liberty" granted to poets by the age of scientific invention. Apollinaire, a poet who would presently succumb to an illness related to his time in

service writes in a nonetheless undaunted vein about the inevitable collaboration between the spirit of technology and the spirit of poetry. He insists that man, familiarizing himself with “those formidable beings which we know as machines,” has opened up new domains for his imagination: “that of the infinitely large and that of prophecy” (229). Apollinaire sees no reason why, in the age of “the telephone, the wireless, and aviation” the poet should feel restricted to the limited space of lyricism. Apollinaire pronounces triumphantly that poets will one day “mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized” (237), and he believes that while poets, “still only at the stage of incunabula,” are uncertain as yet how to use language’s powers, they will soon realize that since all their “fables” (e.g., Icarus) have been realized (e.g., by aviation) it now devolves upon the poet to imagine new fables “which inventors can in turn realize” (237, 234). Hoping to restore poetry to the foremost position in the progress of cultural progress, Apollinaire implies that in lagging behind the times, stuck in the doldrums of Romanticism, poetry has come to occupy an infelicitously anachronistic position that renders it incapable of addressing the issue of technology. Poetry’s role ought to be the role of a visionary force, directing the currents of human creation. Why would poetic prophecy be, for Apollinaire, the logical next step following on the development of advanced technology?

When Apollinaire tells us “the poets wish to master prophecy,” he constructs the new relation to poetry as a techno-scientific one, predicated upon the ideology of predictability and control. It may seem incomprehensible that a poet would make statements like these while knowing those same realities of trench warfare, barbed wire, mustard gas, and aerial bombing that inspired anti-war poets like Siegfried Sassoon. Yet it seems that, for Apollinaire, the barbarity of World War I resided not in mechanization, but in its display of a military ethos *insufficiently inspired by mechanization*. This means: chaotic and unthinking slaughter carried

out with the help of machines must be transcended for the orderly, humane ratiocination that industrial mechanization inspires. Apollinaire, in his optimism, sees poetry's proper role as being in the vanguard of such creative technological progress.

However, in the three decades of military-technological development that separate Merrill from Apollinaire, cultural conceptions about the promise of ideas and their "realization" have radically ruptured. Merrill, like many others, professes a point of view which links an advance of ideas to increasing hazards and dangerous realizations. If there is any visionary (or, *counter-visionary*) force Merrill hopes to develop, it would be for inventors to realize they must proceed with extreme caution in an age in which technology has outstripped humanity to the point of actually endangering it,<sup>90</sup> Departing from the Apollinairean "encyclopedic liberty" of what *can* be done, the new "fable" Merrill offers to scientist-inventors is a fable of restraint.

Yet, like Apollinaire, Merrill pursues the relation between the prophetic and the automatic, or, the mechanized in poetry. Taking dictation from spirits, Merrill diverges from earlier poetic precedent of mining dreams or oracular mediums (as did certain contemporaries of Apollinaire's, such as Yeats).<sup>91</sup> Instead, he makes use of a technology of divination that Merrill himself continually refers to as an "apparatus": the Ouija Board.<sup>92</sup> Constructed as an alphabetic circuit board, its ten Arabic numerals, 26 letters, its binary oppositions "YES" and "NO," and the operator "&," posit language as a sort of computational paradox. At its most basic level, language here appears simultaneously digital (composed of discrete units of irreducible stimulus, i.e., fixed letters) and analog (composed of the kinetic traces of sliding). This is a paradox that

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<sup>90</sup> Merrill himself characterizes his work as not "visionary" but "*revisionary*" (emphasis mine; Merrill 1986, 56).

<sup>91</sup> Merrill's first encounter with Yeats's *A Vision* (Yeats's poetic work written from dictations taken by his wife from various spirits) occurred two weeks after his first Ouija séance with Jackson in 1955. Merrill read *A Vision* a second time in 1962, when living in Athens. The extent of Merrill's indebtedness to—and divergence from—the poetry and mediumistic inspiration of William Butler Yeats has been extensively studied in Mark Bauer's *This Composite Voice*. See esp. 51, 83.

<sup>92</sup> Many of Apollinaire's contemporaries (e.g., Yeats) pursued mediumistic encounters for poetry.

Merrill plays on incessantly, while leaving the paradox resolved. Merrill stages language as a movement across a schematic and concrete space, the space of alphabet. This molecularization of language suspends immediate comparisons to the movement of “cognition,” dissolving it into the workings of apparatus while not yet *resolving* it into the binary poverty of the digital. “ON THIS ALPHABET UNCLUTTERED BY OTHER OBJECTS,” as the spirits declare, the poem is written.<sup>93</sup> But what does it mean to be writing *on* the alphabet? Merrill’s poem brackets alphabet as an instrument of language, allowing it to be reconceived as a scene, a field theory, a dimension in its own right. The epiphanic nature of this poem cannot be extricated from its being epi-alphabetic. This meta-linguistic character to Merrill’s *Sandover* suggests a complex network of production whose primary forces are inflected by proximity and proxy and whose creativity is engaged with its seeming opposite, the algorithmic. Merrill risks the language of poetry by foregrounding the question of “apparatus” so as to discover the limits and the potentials of language to operate outside of (and, in opposition to) techno-logic.<sup>94</sup>

*Sandover*’s unusual mode of artistic production causes a certain sense of *impropriety* to obtrude into the question of generation—and its motives. “Impropriety,” in the sense that rubrics adjudicating authorial “property” appear here to be annulled, through a breakdown of those categories that allow any properly singular subjectivity to be delineated. We are thus freed from analyzing Merrill’s personal motivations only arrive at a new double: what is the limit-point between body/s, author/s, and apparatus? This impasse reminds us of the difficulty of differentiating between the psychic apparatus and its language, a problem described by the spirit interlocutors: “CONTROLLABLE / ELECTRICAL TRIGGERS WORK MAN’S BRAIN &

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<sup>93</sup> Speech by the spirits is distinguished in the text from Merrill’s commentary by appearing in all capital letters.

<sup>94</sup> Gery has argued Merrill’s poetry shows us that “No matter how inevitable it seems that language cannot express truth, that failure in itself promotes a further resistance: Language’s imprecision prevents its users from reducing their understanding of things to an absolute” (144). While I agree with this reading of Merrill’s *Sandover*, I diverge from Gery’s conclusion that Merrill’s ambiguous language “refuses to take sides” (145).

THE BATTERIES/ REMAIN SALT” (182). Throughout the poem, nature, and the embodied psyche as included in nature, are spoken of electro-mechanically. Alluding to the earliest computers, the celestial arrangement of the stars is compared to shifting punch cards, while Earth, also referred to as the “greenhouse,” is “ITSELF/ A HOLE IN A COMPUTER CARD FOR OTHER GREENHOUSES” (132).

The human body is figured as battery or power source for the spirits; during a black-out they tell the authors that “WE COULD READ IN THE DARK BY YR HAND’S WATTAGE” (142). Casting the human body as mechanism raises the question as to what agency language possesses for the human-creaturely being. At one point the archangel, Michael, elatedly describes “THE MACHINE OF THE MIND DRIVEN BY WORDS TO MINE MEANING” a process which he finds quaint and beautiful from his archon’s perspective (346).<sup>95</sup> Does language drive humans like a machine? In this epic, Merrill proposes that we think language beyond a structuring, civilizing, ratiocinating, or species-defining principle in which and through which psychic motivations are “expressed” or “performed.” He speculates instead on how language itself contains agency and literal motivation. To be able to think of a machine mind “driven” by words, we are forced into the realm of analogy, where we can only draw on whatever concepts of mechanistic or technological agency are already available to us. That is, the limits of the analogy shift with the limits of our technological history.<sup>96</sup> In fact, the only recourse we will have to pursue the problem of what impels mind within language will depend upon figurations drawn from the *technological*.

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<sup>95</sup> The double semantic valence of “mine” is doubtless intentional here.

<sup>96</sup> Merrill was an admirer of Julian Jaynes’s 1976 book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. He shares with Jaynes an implicit understanding of the rhetorical connections between man and his machines, especially as these connections come to be expressed through metaphysical analogies.

This question is one that Merrill finds himself also challenged by in the course of conversations with the spirits. Unquestioned in its possession of a soul, the human creature is, in this poem, still predominantly referred to as though it were a mechanism, rather than a creature. The question this raises is why, in fact, our culture is so resistant to the cohabitation of soul and cell, mind and mechanism. Accepting themselves as bodies that are pure mechanism seems to raise little problem for Merrill and Jackson, with one exception being a point at which they discover the so-called “No Accident” clause built into this age of the world (in which everything supposedly happens by design, although that is contradicted later, and never fully resolved). Feeling distressed at the implications for romantic choice, Merrill inserts an interlude lyric in nursery-rhymed trimeter into the transcript-conversation, depicting Jackson’s parents falling in love purely by cosmic design: “Hole by pre-punched hole, / From the magnolia tree// Outpoured the mockingbird’s / Playerpiano roll,” he sarcastically writes (195). Yet the poet, too, is submitting to and demonstrating this determination by mechanism in his use of trimeter’s mechanical-sounding rhyme scheme. The poet, especially the poet who subscribes to formal devices, is always, Merrill insinuates, afraid of being the player piano roll to language’s apparatus (so, too, perhaps thought Keats, in his “Ode to a Nightingale,” wishing, on hearing the bird’s “high requiem,” that he might “become a sod.”) The question posed by the body as mechanism is, rather differently than one might expect, a question as to what driving role the agency of language plays in the actions of that creaturely being. Does language itself drive humans like a machine? To take seriously the challenge Merrill lays before us, we will need to think language beyond a structuring principle in which and through which psychic motivations are “expressed” or “performed”; and we will also need to think beyond a conception of language as a mere, slippery scaffolding upon which are hung the benighted claims of metaphysics.

Instead, we will need to speculate on the possibility that language itself contains a form of agency, a form of literal motivation.

Merrill was an admirer of Julian Jaynes's 1976 book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. He shares with Jaynes an implicit understanding of the rhetorical connections between man and his machines, especially as expressed through certain metaphysical analogies. The final third of *Sandover*, written after reading Jaynes's *Origin*, describes the apparatus of Ouija poetry and its spiritual mise-en-scène in unequivocally technological terms: the spirits refer to "OUR CONNECTION (CUP, BOARD, MIRROR)" as a long-distance telephone call, and they tell Scribe / Hand (JM / DJ) that the schoolroom for the lessons which these human initiates receive is on a spiritually "CLOSED CIRCUIT" relay (371). Yet the human pupils wonder why, "With all your lightning methods to choose from—/ Why this relatively cumbersome / Apparatus of the Board and cup?" (478). Earlier in the epic, after getting Ephraim's initial message commanding that Merrill use the sessions from now on to write "poems of science", Merrill comments, "I supposed vaguely / That inspiration from now on would come / Outright, with no recourse to the Board" (109). They have been told there is precedent for this: the spirits explain that Arthur Rimbaud's spirit ghostwrote Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and that Dante took dictation from a mendicant priest who was possessed (219).

The answer as to why the spirits are relying on the "relatively cumbersome / Apparatus" connects apparatus poetics as a third term (separate from form / content) to the larger questions of agency, ownership, and responsibility discussed above. The reply, from Michael, is uncharacteristically detailed: "WE TRIED DREAMS. THEY CAME TO JM LIKE DOORBELLS, EXPECTATION BUT NO GUEST. / WE TRIED 'INSPIRATION'. IT WAS MUFFLED BY SCREECHING TIRES, KISSES AND DRUNKEN SONG./ SO SANDOVER"



where Merrill, working as the “ABBOT SCRIBE SQUINTING” can remain calm and collected enough to focus and to discern prosodic possibilities within the massive and inchoate transcripts (478). Merrill seems convinced his best hope of writing poems treating such weighty subject matter as “science” actually demands the poetic apparatus of the board as a technological supplement to the already mediated process of poetic composition. Those earlier and more “direct” modes of possession and dictation are apparently found wanting. In conversation with their dead friends, Maria Mitzotaki and W.H. Auden, Merrill laments, “An empty glittering’s our only haul / Without Wystan and you to drive the school / Into these nets. Alone I’m such a fool!” The rather qualified response to this is:

IN ONE SENSE I AGREE  
 U’VE ON YR SIDE UTTER NEUTRALITY,  
 NO MADE TO ORDER PREJUDICES NO  
 BACKTALK JUST THE LISTENER’S PURE O!  
 NULL ZERO CRYING OUT TO BE FILLED IN (328)

There are interesting rhyme-word contrarinesses built in to this pep talk: “Agree” is rhymed with “neutrality,” giving the impartial valence of “neutrality” a bit of a sycophantic spin. Similarly, the “O!” of the listener is rhymed contrarily with NO, posing a conceptual paradox: what listening is also a crying out?

This listening that asks to be filled in contains a clue to Merrill’s understanding of the process of apparatus poetics. Dante’s automatic writing, called listening in to the “galactic radio,” was also such a “crying out to be filled in”, with one crucial difference: for Merrill, the O! always balances on the discriminating knife-edge of NO. That is to say, this act of listening is traversed by the possibility of negation and restraint. Exercising caution against being swept away by revelation’s pathos, Merrill (suddenly breaking mid-text into a sonnet) importunes the spirits: “Give us time to get beyond / —We whom at each turn sheer walls of text / Sweep from

one staggering vista to the next— / That listener’s Oh” (332). Within the stanza’s form, the clausal pacing that orders this sentence also impedes its *sentience*. The stanza, working at cross-purposes with the syntactical, both performs and translates phenomenological or experiential bewilderment (“that listener’s Oh”) into textual shape: whether transcript (“sheer walls of text”) or formal prosody (sonnet). As the echolocation of the mind beats against the “sheer walls of text,” against rhyme and meter, the semantic and the alphabetic, the reader is incessantly reminded that the in-process nature of this revelation requires of its author not only time at the Ouija board, but also time to be recreated once more as delay and duration programmed into the “finished” product. The prosody, thus, seems neither natural *nor* artificial: not “natural,” because codes as a formal translation of a freehand transcript-archive, yet not quite “artificial” because its various effects recreate in the reader an approximation of the baffling noetic experience of revelation.

The *process* of inspiration that creates *Sandover* cannot be reduced to any aesthetic universals, nor even to any one psyche, conscious or unconscious. The process aspires in this way to the condition of language itself: transpersonal apparatus beyond any single subject’s control. The transpersonal aspect of language is recast through its technological “literalization” (its becoming of the letter) in the poetic apparatus of board and cup, appearing as both a mode of production and a mode of inspiration. Thus the supplement of the apparatus paradoxically either performs or enhances Merrill’s critical ability—and his artistic ability.<sup>97</sup> This recasts these powers as the ability to *refuse* what is revealed. Perhaps the most crucial point of Merrill’s ethics of inspiration lies in cultivating an ability to receive that does not preclude the ability to refrain

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<sup>97</sup> Merrill’s talent for seamless resolutions of the calculus of prosodic form is arguably unmatched in the English tradition. One such example can be found in a long poem in *Sandover* entitled “Samos.” This poem has a line-end scheme that manipulates the words “sense, water, fire, land, light” in a sestina-like repeating pattern where a long stanza model [121131144155] mutates through five iterations, to an abbreviated conclusion [12345]. The permutation pattern of each stanza shift repeats the series through the algorithm of  $n - 1$  (thus, if  $n - 1 = 0$ , then  $0 = 5$ ).

from being wholly determined by revelation. What is most extraordinary about Merrill's arrangement of this seeming paradox lies in its immanent critique of perfectibility. His resistance to the equation between power and progress, science and prediction, venture and outcome can be found in the peculiar feature of language that Merrill sets out to praise: that language is flawed.

While the spirits "THINK IN FLASHING TRIGONOMETRIES," they tell their human interlocutors that "WHAT SAVES U IS YR OWN FLAWED SENSE OF THESE" (136). This notion of being saved by a flaw is a peculiar paradox that repeats and develops throughout the epic. After one particularly strange and involute revelation-session, Merrill gasps:

It all fits. But the ins and outs deplete us.  
Minding the thread, losing the maze, we curse  
Language's misleading apparatus. (453)

Yet, perhaps the so-called "misleading" characteristics of apparatus poetics keep it safe from dogmatism's "leading" questions. Language, working *against* meaning, makes a poor machine *and* a valuable form of resistance. Where John von Neumann, father of robotics, would recommend methods for constructing automata capable of paralleling sensory-based cognition through "the synthesis of reliable organisms from unreliable components," Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" will inveigh against such projects. To counter these aspirations of pure sovereignty, she urges us to proliferate uncertainty and plurality within and beside hegemonic codes.<sup>98</sup>

Merrill's transcript-based epic drawn from such "unreliable components" as alphabetic séances produces a counter-automaton. Merrill's epic, regressing from O! to NO, meditates on renewing our strategies of deferral by and through a critical relation to both revelation and the apparatus / apparition which conveys it. Indeed, the persistent philosophy of *Sandover* is the importance of revelation's indirection—and, by extension, the indirection of language. Rather than seeing our technology as a simple extension of *cogito*'s circuitry, Merrill's rewriting of technology as the

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<sup>98</sup> See von Neumann, 329-78, and Haraway, 315-36.

*technē-poiesis* of the apparatus construes the relation between mind and machine not as mimetic conversion but as conversation. The point is neither to abandon our technology, nor to abandon ourselves *to* our technology, but rather to develop an ethical relation to the technology *as* apparatus, never losing sight of the working-together with language that coproduces thought.

Performing a lyrical skepticism that appears, at first glance, perfectly willing to reduce poetry to an algorithm of letters and numbers, Merrill, at a deeper level, commits himself to an ancient, untraceable, and undecidable relation between *technē* and language. By foregrounding the question of “apparatus,” his *Sandover* searches for the limits and the potentials of language to operate outside of—and, in opposition to—a techno-logic of determinate outcomes. To do this, Merrill gives up a certain kind of “author-ity”: he not only allows and admits but also *shows*, *emphasizes* the ways in which the “writing-tool works with us on our thoughts.” This is, however, a working-with, a working-alongside in which the tool and the hand have not yet abandoned each other. The apparatus poetics of *Sandover*, whether in the taking down of transcripts through the second-hand voices from beyond, or from the second *hand* of David Jackson, call attention to rifts and undecidable conditions of poetry’s origination. Merrill’s *Sandover* dwells on the inextricability of accident and invention, possession and inspiration, the arbitrary and the accountable. This inextricability does not confound responsibility, it founds it.

Merrill mounts a self-incriminating critique of the aesthetic subject in which the author, unable to extricate himself from the apparatus, also cannot separate the apparatus from what powers it: language. Speaking of the labor of crafting of this epic’s final product Merrill describes himself as a poet who “[q]uarries from the transcript murky blocks/ Of revelation, now turning a phrase /...Edging into place a paradox” (297-8). Extending this architectural metaphor, he self-deprecatingly calls the product “by now more Tower of Babel // Than Pyramid,”

expressing the difficulty of getting a plethora of ghosts into one seamless poem. While formal prosodic structures and patterning are the epic's unflagging principle of cohesion, While "design" operates as one primary mode of poetic signature, Merrill's use of prosodic signature in *Sandover* takes on complex dimensions with respect to the apparatus. His rhyme schemes consistently create sonic consonance at the site of semantic dissonance. As he tries to build in structures of correspondence through playing with hidden puns, he suddenly finds himself "[s]icken[ed] by these blunt stabs at 'design'" (311). This is all the more striking considering that, for Merrill, formal virtuosity and a talent for "design" was one of his greatest claims to fame—while yet, at the same time, the stylistic trait that exposed him to no small amount of disparagement and ridicule.<sup>99</sup> Stephen Yenser, a great admirer of Merrill's, nonetheless characterizes him as having been a "fabergé among the postmodern poets" (39) during the period that preceded Merrill's 1962 publication of *Water Street*, commonly cited as inaugurating Merrill's "mature" period.<sup>100</sup>

And yet this reinforcing of the possessive aspect of "design" is undercut and ironized by the content of the line: here Merrill is describing the profound effect that the words of one of his archangel interlocutors, Michael, have on him: words "whose deep grain is one with mine." This more sanguine possibility for the property relations suggested by the poem's language—that Merrill's words and Michael's are indistinguishable—is contradicted by the frustration Merrill feels in the process of "quarrying" the poem. At a later point, mid-séance (the poem oscillates

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<sup>99</sup> Many reviews of Merrill's early work fault him for his formal talents, especially as this early work coincided with the heyday of confessional poetry, oracular free verse, etc. The general theme to these negative reviews is that his poetry is all "style" or form and no "substance". Or, when concrete imagery is present, it serves principally as "metaphorical refrain to the formal structure, a commentary and an explication of it" (Humphries, 186).

<sup>100</sup> Richard Howard, writing of Merrill's alleged transformations into maturity, says "I used to reproach this poet...for being, as I called it, bejewelled." Howard symptomizes a modernist predilection for unadorned clarity and line, as opposed to Merrill's earlier poetry where "glaucous pearls were on every page, studding the desolations like tears. No longer: everything has been clarified, consumed, and one looks through the brilliant poems to the experience they render possible by their intensity of purpose, their diamond-hard joy; nothing is decoration or decor now in Merrill's poetry, for the poet has discovered the link between what is cosmetic and what is cosmic" (33-34).

between séance scenes and scenes of meditation apart from the Board), Merrill is asked to answer a riddle by another archangel (Gabriel). Merrill quips, “Oh Lords, I find it hard to have/ Ideas while so busily transcribing yours.” Merrill’s continual insistence in *Sandover* is that the art, not the ideas, belong to him. But before we settle too easily into the form/content dichotomy, the third term of the “apparatus” intervenes. As Michael retorts to Merrill’s quip, “THAT IS NOT SO INNOCENTLY SAID!” (321). Michael is pointing out that the poet’s plea to being merely the “functionary” of a machine is never an innocent one, while at the same time, Merrill emphasizes that ownership and agency rarely if ever overlap in a reliable way. The effect is a critique of the aesthetic subject that could be called a proposal for aesthetic perspectivism, where the author, unable to extricate himself from the apparatus, is equally unable to separate the apparatus from the force it shapes—the force of language. By installing the third term of the apparatus into the form / content divide, Merrill blurs the lines anew, by reminding us that there is not only an aboutness to form and a structure to content: there is additionally a *how* to be considered. Form / content are not free from the question of the mode of production any more than they are free from the moment of inspiration.

### Technē, Beyond the Hand

In Heidegger’s view, “It is not accidental that modern man writes ‘with’ the typewriter and ‘dictates’ ... ‘into’ a machine” (80). Playing on the similarity between *dichten* (the verb for literary composition) and *diktieren* (to dictate), attempts to excavate what he believes, at least at the time of *Parmenides*, to be the history of writing’s long dehumanization. Again employing the rhetoric of accident later on, he stresses that “it is no accident that the invention of the printing press coincides with the inception of the modern period.... This mechanism of setting and

pressing and ‘printing’ is the preliminary form of the typewriter. In the typewriter we find the irruption of the mechanism in the realm of the word” (85). While Heidegger goes so far as to equate the typewriter with λήθη (*lēthē*, oblivion), Merrill’s apparatus poetics are determined to renovate writing technologies for precisely opposite purposes: to sideline the obliviousness of the conscious mind’s accustomed vectors so as to give access—or, rather, *egress*—to the linguistic potentials of submerged social histories of guilt, devastation, and futures currently foreclosed.

This process of renovation, between poet and apparatus, involves what Merrill calls “quarrying” the transcripts; it emerges as an alternative form of the machine-mind driven by words to find meaning, presenting to us the unlocatable predicament of all lyric utterance, but procedurally hyperbolized to an unprecedented scale. Merrill never delineates how much consciousness the spirits actually possess. They explain the mechanism of conveying their revelation in this way: “LIKE YR RADIO & TELEPHONE / WE ARE PROGRAMMD WE ARE THE INSTRUMENTS OF REPLY. ALL / THESE OUR CONVERSATIONS COME FROM MEMORY & WORD BANKS / TAPPD IN U” (140). The instruments of reply, these spirits are the writing apparatus as witnessing-object in the sense of the *Schreib-Zeugen* outlined above. These spirits are a parallel form of linguistic agency: perhaps parasitic, perhaps saprophytic. Yet their purpose, as mechanized speech, still intends itself to and *for* humans. Somewhere between the listening cry of the O! and these “INSTRUMENTS OF REPLY” is the epi-alphabetic question not of how the medium *is* the message, but rather how the medium *hosts* the message.

If an “artifice” is a made object that vaunts its own making as a completed process, what Merrill’s apparatus poetics seeks to achieve in *Sandover* is radically different. *Sandover* offers a shared experience of how the Subject is made object through the receiving of language: the

palpable making of Subject into *medium*. If, after Marshall McLuhan, we can no longer think the “message” entirely apart from the “medium,” we may find in Merrill’s *Sandover* an unexpected working out of this manifesto. Rather than conceptualizing the ghosts and spirits of this poem as “real” supersensory entities, one spirit recommends: “MAKE OF ME THE PROCESS SOMEWHERE OPERATING BETWEEN TREE & PULP & PAGE & POEM” (173). The spirits and angels of *Sandover*, tapping human word banks to operate as “instruments of reply” are more process than persona, more ciphered formula than form of soul. In the realm of the spirits, we are told, there is “No Language here/ But formulas unspeakably complex/ Which change like weather” (140). Language here offers the stage, the maze, the walls, the coulisses, everything except the meaning. Meaning is that which lies inside and yet distinct from language’s misleading apparatus: it is the thread followed though the maze.

Theorizing the implications of seeing language as a “medium” for social concepts, Theodor Adorno spoke of the poetic moment when “language itself acquires a voice” at a juncture of intense equilibrium between subject and object. Adorno calls this event “the unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language” (43). Yet Merrill’s *Sandover* achieves what Adorno presumes to be impossible: it exemplifies forms of linguistic unself-consciousness that are “alien” to the subject while yet remaining coextensive with the subject’s intervening powers of restraint and responsibility. For Adorno, language in poetry speaks itself “only when it speaks not as something alien to the subject but as the subject’s own voice. When the ‘I’ becomes oblivious to itself in language it is fully present nevertheless” (44). Here, Adorno indicates a state of lyric absorption in an object, a paradigm that cannot account for Merrill’s apparatus with its myriad vectors of force and chance. Insisting on the poetic “I” that subtends all poetry, Adorno seeks to distinguish this “I” from a second fate of language that he associates



with the age of technoscientific mass communication, when language becomes “a consecrated abracadabra and succumb[s] to reification, as it does in communicative discourse” (44). Yet, in a moment of grudging approbation for unselfconscious abstract symbolism at the edge of “pure language,” Adorno outlines an alternate, quasi-hieratic method of “quotation, but a quotation not from another poet but from something language has irrevocably failed to achieve” (53).

Merrill’s apparatus poetics, between tree and pulp and page and poem, presents a *deconsecrated* abracadabra, an epi-alphabetic hazarding of poetry against this realm of language as quotation. In Adorno’s words, Merrill’s epic presents technology as that which language has “irrevocably” failed—or even refused—to achieve. Instead, *Sandover* *disachieves* the pure technification of language, returning, perhaps, to an earlier, “collective undercurrent” in the history of technology, past paradigms now “degraded to objects of history,” (Adorno, 45): a prior moment, such as that from which Marcel Mauss spoke in 1927, as he describes a humanity self-identified “with the mechanical, physical and chemical order of things,” who still believes that, in the act of creation, “he creates himself; he creates at once his means of living, things purely human, and his thought inscribed in these things” (53). Rather than the consummate humanism of Mauss’s statement, I want to emphasize the horizon of post-humanism immanent within this very quotation as it notes the “inscription” of thought within things. In the aftermath of humanism, this “inscription” may be read not as a sign or proclivity of humanity, but as a *precondition* of the creaturely life called human. This de-consecrated abracadabra, this creaturely precondition of the apparatus (mnemic, linguistic, poetic), opposes a second form of inscription, or, rather, *conscription*: the conscription of thoughts *into* things. These are the “technics” that Adorno’s colleague Marcuse will impugn as “a universe of instrumentalities” demanding “submission to the technical apparatus” which actually bolsters the “legitimacy of domination”

through the “all-out technical rationalization of the apparatus” which Marcuse connects to the moment of Fascism (166, 158, 189).

Marcuse fears that, as “the rational hierarchy merges with the social one” in a society unequivocally determined by its technology (166), this may paradoxically “increase the weakness as well as the power of man. At the present stage, he is perhaps more powerless over his own apparatus than he ever was before” (235). Mauss, following on his earlier, humanistic attempts at a sociological etiology of technics (or, “techniques”), will still eventually arrive at a skeptical renunciation of the project. By the middle of World War II, he admits that “techniques are already independent, better still; they are in a category by themselves with a place of their own, no longer merely swayed by happy accidents or fortuitous hazards” (152). Interestingly, at the moment technology achieves “independence” from fortuitous hazards, it also appears to achieve independence from human restraint. Yet Mauss reprimands any nostalgic humanism that would “oppose matter and mind, industry and ideals. In our times, the power of the instrument is the power of the mind, and its use implies morality as well as intelligence” (153). Yet if matter and mind must not be opposed, still, the ethical questions of the instrument’s “use” will not be easily resolved.

If, with Maurice Blanchot, we might suppose that “literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (21), we may suppose, in returning to Nietzsche’s typewriter, that here a particular question of literature begins: here writing encounters itself as thought grown indistinguishable from its co-laboring apparatus. When we come to see that “the writing-tool works with us on our thoughts,” we are compelled to entertain the question of the apparatus. The German word for this *Schreibzeug* contains a variant of the word for things or devices—“*Zeugen*”—yet the infinitive verb, “*zeugen*” means “to witness.” A “*Zeuge*” is a witness—and

the *Schreibzeug*, balanced between thing and process, is itself a witness to the writing that pertains to this balance, a writing that belongs to this undecidable process of working-alongside: *mit-arbeiten*. What distinguishes this alongside-working of writing from writing's machine? As Heidegger would stress, "Writing, from its originating essence, is hand-writing" (85).<sup>101</sup> Which is to say: writing imagines humanity (synecdochally, through the "hand").<sup>102</sup> While the *Schreibzeug* is possessed of moving parts, the motion of these parts still yet directly depends on (or, rather, is still *seen* to depend on) the hand of the user. Its energy remains manual. The apparatus is believed to *work with us* on our thoughts only when we have not yet ceased to see how it works with us through our hands. As the hand works with the mind, so the apparatus works with the hand: or, so we are inclined to believe.

Let us suppose that such apparatus-writing begins at the moment when both its tools and its language have become a question: when both the tools and the "using" of language present themselves *as questions*. Strangely, this event of seeing how tools "work with us on our thoughts" coincides with an era dedicated to reducing or even eliminating the manual character of the writing device. Writing, from Nietzsche onwards, will only increase, technologically, its quotient of uncanny heteronomy. At this moment in which the apparatus "appears", it appears as an apparition: a ghost of mind and matter moving together as, all the while, writing becomes increasingly self-moving. While the *Schreibzeug* undergoes the process of becoming a machine, the specter of technology's prehistory appears: a writing "apparatus"; a witnessing-object. This apparatus has never properly existed. Still it comes to haunt the labor of thought. It shows itself

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<sup>101</sup> Heidegger, contra Nietzsche, pronounces that the typewriter is nothing less than the destruction of the word. However, the spirit of hand-writing, a direct energy link between hand and writing, is, I believe, the crucial element here—crucial because ephemeral. Both Heidegger and Nietzsche, in different ways, insist on the critical moment when thought and writing-tool become *reciprocally* determining and yet not wholly alienated through a technological network that obscures the hand-made and event-like act of writing. Their bias as to what radical form this hand-machine-writing may take is arbitrary: the philosophical problematic for both consists in *responsibility*.

<sup>102</sup> See also Derrida's *On Touching*, for his description of "humanualism" as a concept informed by a "teleological hierarchy" of "presuppositions about the animal" which would see "the hand [as] properly human" (152-53).

at work—between hand-writing and automated writing, neither one nor the other—troubling notions of accountability that distinguish the given from the made, the having-been-given from the having-been-made. Between hand and machine, the apparatus subsists. These *Schreib-Zeugen* are figured as witnesses to the developing questions of writing—how far will the hand, synecdoche of the human, be imputed as agent of the word? “The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand,” Heidegger grimly pronounces—a wrenching separation he finds to proceed toward the language’s destruction by “mechanical forces it releases” (80).

Mechanical forces are being unleashed—from where? All the while, as the word is forced into inauthenticity, “into something ‘typed’,” Heidegger warns that in our haste to make use of the word, “Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication” (80-81). Yet other forces are being unleashed, other forces are degrading the hand and the word it represents. “Through the hand occur both prayer and murder,” (80) he proclaims in the series of lectures which make *Parmenides* while, having relinquished his Nazi party membership, he nonetheless continues to lecture in Freiburg: it is the winter of 1942, in Nazi Germany. Meanwhile, murder, hand in hand with its technologies of writing and unwriting, is working its way across Europe: a writing which Paul Celan will later connect to language’s own journey “through the thousand darknesses of deathdealing speech.”<sup>103</sup> This “answerlessness” in before its technologies is that which Celan maintained language [*die Sprache*] must confront, faced by its death-dealing instances [*todbringender Rede*]<sup>104</sup> in which the hand can no longer recognize any humanistic “essential realm of the hand.” Heidegger’s understanding, at the time of *Parmenides*, is that “only a being

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<sup>103</sup> “durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede” (my translation). See Paul Celan’s acceptance speech for the Bremen prize, *Gesammelte Werke in Fünf Bänden*, 3:186.

<sup>104</sup> *Rede* refers to the instances of speech, to acts of speech, to hearsay, to ideological language, while *Sprache* refers to speech in its more abstract finitude as a linguistic system. *Rede* alludes to instrumentalized *Sprache*.

which, like man, ‘has’ the word (μύθος, λόγος) [myth/ story, reason/language], can and must ‘have’ ‘the hand.’ the ‘work’ of the hand, the ‘hand-work,’ and the tool. The handshake seals the covenant. The hand brings about the ‘work’ of destruction” (80). But it will not be anything recognizably analogous to “the hand” that brings forth that destruction which, from this point on, will haunt the world through every further step towards any technological horizon.

In an echo of this haunting by the demise of the hand’s “humanity”, we hear from Merrill how Mirabell’s eyes glint with the unending guilt of “nuclear fire-ache” (488). The “BONE HEAPS OF HUMAN THOUGHT” (325) that this poem dwells on suggest how, after the history of species-exceptional, endemically human guilt, even after a human apocalypse, the story will not definitively end. Our time on earth will remain as the lifeless remnants of our technology, “A VAST OBSIDIAN PILE GLEAMING ON THE PLAIN RUTTED BY HIS MACHINES” (459). Dante, allegedly an earlier precursor of the revelations by dictation that Merrill and Jackson are privy to, writes an *Inferno* from such images. Yet Merrill adds, pessimistically, “The lyrics may be changing. Dante saw / The Rose in fullest bloom. Blake saw it sick. / You ... who have seen the bleak / Unpetalled knob, must wonder: will it last / Till spring? Is it still rooted in the Sun?” (363). Indeed, the lyrics *must* change: if the “true starting point” of *Sandover* is the traumatic return of the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this insinuates that the *Nachtrag* of nuclear weapons detonated against civilians is an annihilation borne by every subject who comes after. Because this *Nachtrag* cannot “progress” in any deterministic or evolutionary way, Merrill’s method of radical anachronism obviates a linear plot involving a starting point, progress, and ending point dictated by rationalizable causes. In other words, the beginning-of-the-end apocalyptic model is not at work here: and Merrill’s anti-apocalyptic warnings are no jeremiad. Instead, radical anachronism gives us an alternate apocalypse, the fulfilling-unveiling

whose starting point is an ending: the end of the notion of beginning, the end of belief in the “starting point” of “starting over”. The questions of causality, accident, influence, and prediction thus will have to be considered closely in their involvement in this prophecy by apparatus.

### The Trance-personal

*Sandover* is an overwhelmingly intertextual document, in which the literary historian who might find any number of influences, allusions, and homages.<sup>105</sup> One scholar, having traced exhaustively the many points of contact with Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, admits of Merrill’s epic that “For all of its debt to Dante, it could only have been written by a twentieth-century American nourished by seventeenth-century English literature, by French culture from Baudelaire to Valéry to Proust, by German culture from Wagner to Rilke, and above all by both actual and mythic Hellenic experience, the allegory of the mind and the discovery of the senses” (Mariani, 197).<sup>106</sup> In other words, this poem could scarcely have been written.

The sheer improbable specificity of the literary ingredients that have gone into producing the epic ought to decelerate any intention towards explication of its provenance. In a different form of critical presumption to draw schemas of cause-and-effect between author and work, Robert von Hallberg says, in his early analysis of Merrill’s epic, that this is just the sort of poem that a poet like Merrill—an “aesthetician” and a formalist—should *not* have been able to write (116).<sup>107</sup> What these two critical positions have in common is a desire to know *how* a work has been produced: this perspective on the conditions of artistic production presumes that an author

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<sup>105</sup> The annotated concordance for Merrill’s allusions and references that can be found in Robert Polito’s *A Reader’s Guide to James Merrill’s The Changing Light at Sandover* requires more than one hundred pages.

<sup>106</sup> Projecting a different tradition onto Merrill’s poetics, Richard Sáez sees in *Sandover’s* “interplay between legend and pattern” the disjunctive and violent practice of creation that defines the “catachreses of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry...to reveal a reality far away from earthly attachments” (38).

<sup>107</sup> Von Hallberg sees Merrill as responding in an interesting and perverse way to the Confessional context of his poetic moment, seeking especially to confound the two tenets of this movement: 1) that poems originate in their subject matter; 2) that poets are earnest about the content of their utterances. For full discussion see pp. 94-116.

develops out of a calculable tradition, and organically into a particular path of maturation. *Sandover* proves disruptive to these frequently relied-upon approaches, precisely because its mode of authorship—its authorial practice—experiments with the very parameters upon which these modes of exegesis have been traditionally based. *Sandover's* intertextual terrain and ubiquitous citationality nonetheless veers away from typical postmodern techniques of quotation-montage through the centripetal force of its unrelenting poetic formalism. Merrill is cannily aware of and yet resistant to the poetic trends of the time. His poetry re-works and complicates Cold War American styles as widely divergent as Confessionalism and Language poetry, and yet this is less an effect of self-differentiating disdain than of something that amounts to an historic depth—or, rather, to a haunting.<sup>108</sup>

*Sandover's* unusual mode of artistic production raises a question normally submerged or invisibilized by poetry in a tradition context: what conditions gave rise to its writing, and who ought to take credit? No edition of *Sandover* credits David Jackson as a co-author, yet many critics raise the point of his participation as an overlooked factor. There is the “problem,” of course, of the Ouija board—and the spirits, whether of the dead (Auden, Yeats, etc.) or the daemonic (Ephraim, Mirabell, etc.). Not one single critic takes seriously the question of spiritual authorship, or, rather, this question is generally elided in favor of questions that lead back to David Jackson and the *folie à deux* hypothesis. Thanks to the elision of authorial questions, many early critical responses approached Merrill through a psychoanalytic hermeneutic, trying to account for the unconscious dimensions of producing this monumentally eccentric work.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> In John Hollander's assessment of Merrill's relation to anti-formalist and confessional vogues of his time, Merrill “assimilated the impulses of narrative autobiography to a commanding and continuing mythopoeia” that avoids what Hollander calls the “shrill and pitiful mode of contemporary verse” (126).

<sup>109</sup> See, for example Sáez, 35-56. Yet other critics have expressed frustration with excessively psychoanalytic attempts to account for *Sandover*. One on Humphries lampoons these earlier critical efforts as having mistaken the epic for a mere “regurgitation of a life's reading and experience, a justification of art and sexual preference, argument for childlessness, a working through of Oedipal morasses ... all set in motion by mid-life crisis” (192).

Merrill's poetry is haunted out of contemporaneity by its suffusion, even its over-saturation, with poetic histories. In formal poetry, this saturation also amounts to a *practice of history*: a practice of its forms. The difference between Merrill and the Modernists in this respect is that where the Modernists foreground the haunting *absences* of a vital history—focusing on the de-transcendentalized ruins, the oracular murmurs of the dead, the imminence of violence and the pure mechanization of the mind—Merrill foregrounds the urgency or “convergency” of the putatively outmoded past; history or *histories* recrudescence, endure, and permute headlong throughout this epic, partly through prosody and form. The effect is a polyphonic over-determination of histories—prosodic, mythic, and otherwise—which, in their clamoring for attention and resurrection, seem in danger of leaving the present speechless.

This complex patterning of Merrill's prosodic philosophy, has also been discussed by Mutlu Konuk Blasing; focusing on the effects Merrill's uniquely formalist methods create in combination with figural techniques, Blasing describes how an earlier long poem by Merrill tracks perspectival movement from an out-of-doors scene into the inside of Merrill's own house.<sup>110</sup> She notes that Merrill, on having recounted the process of this poem's composition, avowed that he had not initially known how to continue the poem once the scene shifted to the indoors: until he remembered that “stanza” is the Italian word for room. The result of this epiphany was that Merrill switched lineation; moving to *a-b-b-a* rhymed quatrains, he finished the poem, “indoors.” Blasing offers this as an instance of Merrill's “transpersonal autobiographical writing” in which the transpersonal connects the personal to its surroundings

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Yet Humphries, for all his dissatisfaction with the psychoanalytic structuralism of these readings, gives us a poststructuralist account of Merrill's predicament that is equally lacking in the specific: in Humphries's very compelling and elegant reading of the de-stabilization of personal identity in Merrill's poetry, the Oedipal Merrill is replaced with a poetry “harbor[ing] an incorporeal, ectoplasmic Merrill” who pursues no analyzable fetish or sexual yearning but rather some “amoeboid object of desire” (175).

<sup>110</sup> “Urban Convalescence,” from *Water Street*



(109). In agreement with this reading, I would add that the “transpersonal” aspect Blasing indicates also escapes being read as a mere passageway between the personal and the political. This is not a poetics of equation, rather, this is a poetics of allegorization, involving fictive and fugitive affinities. For the “epiphany” described above, we see Merrill connecting the virtuality of a word’s history (the etymology of “stanza”) with the textual problem of shifting a scene from outside to inside. By insisting on the allegorical isomorphism of poetic and architectural form, and by using this posited isomorphism to generate further thought, Merrill draws on the counterfactual powers of allegorical thinking to generate not only the scaffold of a figure, but, more mysteriously, to choreograph language’s formal organization (stanza form).

“Subscribing to such marked conventions without any effort to naturalize his forms effects an impersonal, intertextual erosion of the personal,” Blasing continues, distinguishing between formalist writing that “naturalizes” itself as a transparent aesthetic, and an alternative version of formalism that “erodes” the *property relation* usually claimed between poet and process (109). This “impersonal, intertextual erosion of the personal” happens by a shift in form that does not present itself as expressively continuous with the speaker voice, mood, or message. In fact, the shift in form expresses the discontinuousness of poet and poem—so that, it would seem, the architecture of the surroundings has more in common with the poem’s shape than the poet does. So too the “voices” which are actually the kinetic swerves of the planchette across the Ouija board. The “transpersonal” aspect of Merrill’s *Sandover* cannot be simply located, nor equated to the universal, the personal-political, the psychoanalytic *id*, or any other abstract entity. The transpersonal is itself a *mode of production*.

Somewhere in the process between tree and pulp and poem, the “transpersonal” dimension of *Sandover* is produced. The specificity of the way Merrill’s epic engages the

transpersonal has to do with how form in this poem appears as a coefficient of belatedness (rewritten from transcripts), and how the poem hints at its being unauthored (influenced by trance). This formal temporality of belatedness (in that the form happens only after the revelation), emerging from what Merrill calls “quarrying” the transcripts, stages a second form of the “machine mind driven by words to find meaning.” Form becomes something seemingly contrary to thought.

Merrill engages language as a movement across a schematic space of alphabet, yet we do not think in letters, though perhaps we think in words. Thus, Merrill’s epi-alphabetic formal nonlocatability creates a discontinuity that *drives* form, compelled by a poetic delight in linguistic recursion which (re)figures states of possession: what we might call “trance-personal.” For Merrill, one key figure for this state is illustrated by a vignette about the experience of seeing a film featuring his deceased friend, the filmmaker Maya Deren. Earlier in the epic, Deren, while still alive, visited Merrill and Jackson’s home, where she collaborated in séances that make up the *Book of Ephraim*. In this later scene, reappearing as a ghostly cinematic remainder, we see her recorded in her ethnographic film *Divine Horsemen*, participating in a Haitian ritual of spirit possession. Merrill’s observation of her cinematic ghost sees “Delight / Alone informs her dance, unself-possessed” (505), which poses a question that lies at the heart of the trilogy: who is the unself who possesses? Is this a simple protean field of everything the self is not, that is, the unconscious?

The technological medium that conveys this unself, the cinematic apparatus, is significant. This apparatus creates a scene in which we are both included in and other to the temporal flow of possession. Furthermore, in a cinematic record of possession, we observe a subject who has become similarly “other” to her contemporaneous stream of time. These

temporal dislocations of the cinematic event seem to parallel the unlocatability of the poetic utterance mediated by the apparatus: tree, pulp, page, poem. This condition of Merrill's entire epic pursues the possession of unself: the unself, if unlocatable, is no mere negation. The Unself is a matter of tuning. One particularly haunting passage of possession in *Sandover* picks up a strange and overwhelming voice from beyond. Its free-form yet clearly lineated utterance is injected abruptly into a passage more tonally measured:

Now, ripple within ripple on black water,  
 O O O O O O O O O O  
 Pulse of the galactic radio  
 Tuned then to mortal wavelength in mid-phrase

IVE BROTHERS HEAR ME BROTHERS SIGNAL ME  
 ALONE IN MY NIGHT BROTHERS DO YOU WELL  
 I AND MINE HOLD IT BACK BROTHERS I AND  
 MINE SURVIVE BROTHERS HEAR ME SIGNAL ME  
 DO YOU WELL I AND MINE HOLD IT BACK I  
 ALONG IN MY NIGHT BROTHERS I AND MINE  
 SURVIVE BROTHERS DO YOU WELL I ALONE  
 IN MY NIGHT I HOLD IT BACK I AND MINE  
 SURVIVE BROTHERS SIGNAL ME IN MY NIGHT  
 I AND MINE HOLD IT BACK AND WE SURVIVE (360)

This tuned broadcast from the “galactic radio” is purported also to have reached Dante. It is one of the most haunting moments in the entire epic, staging the unimaginable distance of the furthest cosmos while telescoping into mannered verse's familiar imagery, “ripple within ripple on black water.” Ten O sounds, or ten zeroes, erupt alienness into the nearby teacup, issuing from “I AND MINE”—who speaks? Whoever it is, the cosmic pulse uncannily declares the receivers “BROTHERS.” But is this communication even conscious of its reception? Are these BROTHERS at the teacup accidental proxies for the intended recipients?

The spirit hordes refer to this epi-alphabetic hosting having created fear of the transpersonal throughout history, as people “SWORE THEY HAD BEEN POSSESSD BY

DEVILS OR ANGELS WHEN / WE HAD BUT TOUCHD THE SWITCHES OF THEIR OWN SLEEPING POWER. / IN MAN SALT IS THE SWITCH” (140). The uncanny hosting of the voices of the damned through language relates to Maya Deren’s uncanny reappearance to Merrill and Jackson through the silver screen. This resonance of the cinematic uncanny as a host for unlocatable projections turns up in another place, when Merrill discovers that his dead friend and continued interlocutor, Maria, is not the entity with whom he had believed himself to be communing. Instead, “Maria” is the spirit projection of “voice and aspect, copied to the life” which Merrill phrases as being impersonated by “some master reel.” The cinematic metaphor blurs simultaneously into a second metaphor of fishing (“reel”), with spirits fishing for living souls. The spirit voice says its impersonations are “To clothe its naked current” which might otherwise be too powerful.

The “current” here can be read as electrical, fluid, temporal, or all three at once. Merrill is figured by Maria’s ventriloquist as “GLINTING IN THE STREAM OF LETTERS” (465) making the alphabetic a fourth part of the fluid temporality of raw energy. The figuration of host, current, ground, foreground, singularity and repeatability becomes even further ramified. One of Merrill’s tenets is that it is language, rather than factuality, that creates belief. At one point his tendency towards skepticism finds itself dissolving within “Intuition weightless and ongoing/ Like stanzas in a book/ Or golden scales in the melodic brook.” Book and brook now reconnected through rhyme, “Maria” adds the final pun to this network: speaking of the images Merrill’s linguistic credulity fashions, she says, “NEVER LET THOSE SCALES DROP FROM YOUR EYES” (466). Maria here alludes to the blindness of Paul (erstwhile Saul), the apostle who finally accepts his mission to the church only once his light-evoked blindness falls from his eyes miraculously, “like scales.” Maria’s advice is opposed to this cult of revelation. Indeed, the

persistent philosophy of Sandover is the importance of the indirection of revelation—and, by extension, language. That the revelation *in* language *is* language, remaining unseen for its being in plain view. “GLINTING IN THE STREAM OF LETTERS,” the clarity of the medium means that we do not see what surrounds us; yet any fisherman knows that this medium, despite its clarity, diffracts and thereby displaces the apparent location of whatever is immersed within it.

If Saul’s version of Truth is that of *alēthia*, the “undisclosed”, the Merrill’s version recognizes the close cognate between the unveiling of apocalypse and the undisclosed of revealed Truth: both are violent transformations of the field of appearances in favor of the field of fated actuality and final self-possession. If the counterweight to *alēthia* could be the brook/book of Lethe, this should not be mistaken for the Lethe of forgetting, rather it is perhaps the Lethe of recounting, the Lethe of becoming unself-possessed, submersed in a current that flows from an unknown origin. This anti-*alēthia* is the forgetting of self that the unself of process allows. Precisely this form of undisclosed revelation ends the passage above with the speech of the unself tuned out of the galactic radio. At the end of its kinetic onrush across the board, “Pausing to be reread, then pulsing slowly/ O O O O O O O O O / The cup glides off the far edge of the Board” (360). Trying to understand what voice has come through, Merrill imagines the alien unself of “Life itself speaking. Song of the blue whale / Alone in Space.” Glinting with the current of language.

### Unclear Future, Nuclear Time

To return to the miniature archival tragedy as twenty reams of transcripts are consumed by the flames, we see Merrill’s deep and even philosophical commitment to the erasure of origins and sources, or, rather, the erasure of the fictitious origin. While some might argue that

the origin/al of *Sandover* was located on those 10,000 sheets of handwritten paper, Merrill seems convinced that either this origin is unimportant, this starting-point must be destroyed, or that the “true starting point” lies elsewhere. As the epic explains, human history begins only after two other creaturely races managed to destroy their earlier worlds through careless uses of nuclear science. Maria explains that human myths regarding the distant past have a real, and specifically nuclear dimension to them. While “THESE MYTHS THAT ANTECEDE ALL MYTH ARE COUCHED / IN DAUNTING GENERALITIES,” their truth is “RADIATION TO THE BILLIONTH POWER / OF EXPLODING ATOMS” (388).

Here we returning to the moment in the final part of the trilogy, where the spirit guides witness an underground nuclear explosion.<sup>111</sup> This nuclear future is predicted to be the outcome of a long history that mankind has had of a problematic relation to its machines. “WHEN / THE RISE OF THE MACHINE 1ST WEIGHD UPON MAN,” the spirits recount, “HE TURND THEN FROM NATURE FROM HIS SOUL ?ED ONLY HIS EXISTENCE” (182).

Mankind, thinking of human existence now as a separate question from the existence of anything else, places a rupture into the fabric of Being. The human, for the spirits, is more or less a machine; and yet equipped with the black box of “imaginative powers,” a faculty possessed not even by the archons, the human is capable of unpredictable ends. Even the God of this epic, is suspected of being mechanistic: when God B’s song brushes through the board one day, the Auden spirit muses later, “THOSE TONES WERE EITHER / THOSE OF AN ETERNAL V WORK OR A MACHINE / SET TO LAST UNTIL THE BATTERIES/ RUN DOWN” (363). The status of who is speaking, how, and for what ends is questioned and re-questioned every step of the way, and it is this questioning, combined with a radical reconception of the poet’s relation to voice, that constitute one of *Sandover*’s most remarkable achievements.

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<sup>111</sup> In fact, this turns out to have been a real occurrence, which Merrill reads about in the newspapers afterwards.

The question of voice in writing—a question that has haunted us ever since the invention of writing, as Derrida would have it, or, a question that has haunted us in particular ever since Derrida recast it as the spanner to throw into the works of metaphysics—is a question of particular relevance to the poetic genre: indeed, the concept of “voice” has been considered among the most fundamental ways we make sense of any poem. This conceptual schema holds particularly true for the lyric, but even when it comes to the epic form, we still prefer to say that the *Ramayana* was written by Valmiki, and not Vedic culture; the *Odyssey* by Homer and not Greece. The Derridean critique of the concept of (textual) Voice has attended to the presumed guarantee of Presence represented by the voice, a guarantee that sets itself against the inferior, the corrupting, or the dangerously supplementary absence-prosthesis of Writing. Voice, in this classical binary, overlaps not only with Presence, but also with Identity, with a cohesive Subject. To follow the lines of this deconstructive critique into the realm of poetic criticism, the argument would run that the overemphasis on Voice in the lyric poem, for example, owes its existence to a cult of self-presence that affirms the possibility of a momentarily fixed identity (fixed, or perhaps “transfixed” by passionate emotion, even if recollected in tranquility). This poetic subject-emotion-object triad may be deconstructed to reveal that, at the heart of any seemingly self-present emotive utterance like a poem, absence and the trace have installed a perpetual game of *différance*. In light of this, how have the many voices of *Sandover*—voices which already present themselves as ghostly, as absent—allowed themselves to be read?

Many critics have noted that, in keeping with deconstruction of the poetic self, the practice of Ouija board poetic rituals emphasizes a conception of creative self that can only be construed as “multiple, ambiguous, fluid” (Keller, 137).<sup>112</sup> It would seem that the practice poetry

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<sup>112</sup> Merrill himself has indicated sympathy for this sort of reading: in an interview with Helen Vendler, he waxes enthusiastic about the potential infinity contained within the self, a self that (Ouija-produced) poetry can reveal to be

provided some form of textual heuristic which could depressurize the impacted vicissitudes of selfhood to reveal, in its non-self-identity, a liberty of the limitlessly protean sort. This skilled formalism is one of the few things that Merrill's critics unanimously agree upon, even as this consensus about form and formalism also contributes to arguments over Merrill's aesthetic periodization (is he a late modernist? A postmodern parodist?) Others characterize the spirits speaking in *Sandover* as more readily ascribable to Merrill's voice than to an aleatory policy of textual assemblage, distinguishing Merrill's methods from those of modernist classics such as *The Cantos* or *The Wasteland* (Materer, 99).

However, a slightly different relation between voice and the aleatory, between quotation, possession, and the apparatus is given, I argue, within the landscape of the poem itself. It is offered by the poem that humans, in their history of creating machines, have perhaps turned from their Nature, but they have also, accidentally, stumbled upon a more profound means of connection to their universe: "ELECTRONICS...ADVANCED THANKS TO COMMERCE'S PASSION FOR COMMUNICATION, TELLS YOU THERE ARE SIGNALS." The irony to this spirit-quotation is that it foregrounds how humans, in a passion for communication with each other (over money), discovers a communication with the wholly other that could only ever be transcoded or denied as significant outright. There could be no real, unmediated "listening" to those galactic radio spirits Dante heard, (quasar?) pulses from a time when "DREAM, FACT, & EXPERIENCE WERE ONE / THOSE SIGNALS? THE UNIVERSAL WIND RATTLING HEAVEN'S DOOR: / UP FROM THIS BEAT SWARMD DANTE'S POETRY" (132-33).

The importance of this formulation to *Sandover*'s reconfiguration of voice in the age of technology cannot be overstated. This passage suggests that what has been lost in between Dante

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"much stranger and freer and more far-seeing than the one you thought you knew." See Merrill's "Art of Poetry" in *Recitative*, 194.



and the current age of nuclear power and post-industrialism, is not a trust in machines or a trust in god, it is a trust that god and machines have something to do with each other. Where “design,” embodied now by technology, has been severed from the transcendental, so too has its opposite, the aleatory. Working against cultural commonsense, *Sandover* reminds its readers of a world in which the unknowable and/or the transcendental was believed to appear most clearly in and upon the aleatory. Dante did not compose, he took dictation, the spirits of the apparatus claim. Whether traced back to the origins of poetic utterance at the Delphic oracle at the arbitrary intersections between *mantis*, *theoros*, and *prophetes*,<sup>113</sup> or recollected as recently as that aleatory poetics enshrined by the Romantic poets, who took as their mascot instrument of choice not the lyre but the Aeolian harp, whose music was the wind’s—chance? Fancy? Divine? That undecidability was crucial to the re-injection of the transcendental attempted by the Romantic movement into a world they feared too close to disappearing under the ideology of the Machine. Almost two centuries later, in a world in which even the winds have been associated with the uncontrollable power of nuclear fallout, an Aeolian-aleatory poetics re-emerges with a similar goal in mind: to re-suture the oracular and the machine, the transcendental, the incomprehensible, and the unmotivated together.

In just such a vein, Maria describes how she gave up pursuing a career in music once she became captivated by something else: “EFFECTS UNSTUDIED INDEED SCARCELY HEARD / AS ONCE WHEN 3 COINCIDENTAL SOUNDS / A WIND BELL IN THE GARDEN A DOOR CHIME / & THE HIGH CRY OF A SEAGULL MADE ONE FLEETING / TONIC CHORD.” The implication is that aleatory conditions of *coincidence* (as opposed to purely stochastic events) are those that ultimately ground our intuitive principles of

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<sup>113</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the relation between oracle, prophet, and messengers to the Greek polis, see Nagy, 56-64.

meaning-creation. “IS MUSIC NOT LIKE TIME / RETOLD?” she continues; “LIKE THE NO ACCIDENT MOTIF / A WAY OF TELLING THAT INSPIRES BELIEF?” (206) Merrill meditates explicitly on how rhyme in poetry (e.g., “motif” and “belief”) conceptualizes how, in language, the aleatory and the significant connect. In language, “significance” remains strictly separate from the factual, from the empirical, from anything promising reliable outcomes and exploitable yields. Merrill, whose prophecy is not so much about the near future as it is in search of time “re-counted,” hopes that our language, epi-alphabetically, might add up to something better than our calculations and numbers have. Strangely enough, the only hope we seem to have, according to *Sandover*, is to be found in a certain mode of error.

### The Value of Flaw

After one of the earlier nuclear apocalypses, the messengers describe how there was a “VIOLENT LIDDING OF REASON” by God, who then sends “MAN THE IDEA: TO CREATE, A REASOND INDIRECTION” (242). The “idea,” crucially, is not born from reason, but something that can exist only after reason relents. The “idea,” or, reasoned indirection is that which manifests, as we are told, by its method of slow accumulation in culture. Inspiration by possession and by proxy had always formed a component of this reasoned indirection within the poetic tradition: “LANGUAGE NEED[S] ALWAYS THE MESSENGER AT THE ELBOW”—only here there is not the messenger at the elbow, there is the machine, the apparatus, at the elbow (242). Technology has been newly incorporated into the scene of inspiration. How will this lead man back to his nature instead of farther away?

Language’s powers of contradiction and homophony are what, for Merrill, allows it to hide in plain view a *logos*-apparatus: “IN THE BEGINNING MIGHT THE WORD / (OR

FORMULA) NOT HAVE REMAINED UNHEARD / UNTIL IT HAD ENGENDERED BOTH ITS OWN / ANTONYM & THE ODD HOMOPHONE,” their spirit-friends explain (341). Here we see a reversal of the usual metaphysical relation between *logos* and *alēthia*’s undisclosedness. Here, *logos*, like Heraclitus’s Nature, “loves to hide.” The poetic practice of anti-*alēthia* codes as work against future apocalypse. In an essay entitled, “Against Apocalypse,” Lee Zimmerman tracks the increasingly dialogic constitution of Merrill’s epic. Zimmerman reads Merrill’s conversational formalism “as a narrative strategy and a way of knowing...a way of containing the dark forces” as each and every voice “depends upon its counterpart” (187). In a much larger frame, this dependence on the counterpart allegorizes the precarious politics of nuclear power. Once nuclear annihilation comes into being as a technological possibility, an event *which must never take place*, nothing ensures the survival of the world *except* language: that is, conversation, communication.

What must never take place can only and always *take time*—that not-taking-place of the imminently possible is a negative event only visible from the vantage point of duration. This poetic “conversation” –which itself cannot take place so much as take time—operates through a mode of mutual dependence which returns us to the question of origins at the same moment as it raises its question of its own historicity. Here, where one voice defers to and differs to another, the poem’s “reliance on conversation, in its double origin ... in its understanding of the kinship of and distinction between its many, many tongues, Sandover locates authority everywhere. The trilogy thus describes and embodies a cosmic web that depends upon and transfigures the particularity of the self” (Zimmerman, 187-8). Again, this question of the particular self can be read or re-read as a temporalizing of the relations that constitute the self: what could it mean to rethink the coherence of the “synchronic” self through the illegitimate diachronies of hauntings,

ghostworlds, apocalypses? At one point the Muse of History, Clio, appears to speak of the “DIMLY VAULTED BRINE- / ENCRUSTED CHAMBERS MAN CALLS BRAIN” (401). As “History” herself slant-rhymes “brine” and “brain”, she constructs these materials as *nearly* but not quite identical, homophonically speaking. Flaw’s deciding power, both linguistically *and* empirically, determines the crucial difference between salt water and neurochemistry, as a rhyme’s inaccuracy suggests that “brain” cannot be wholly reduced to salt water. Rhyme’s error directs us (evolutionarily speaking) to that event of molecular “flaw” which once upon a time transfigured brine into brain. This figure of flaw also hints at felicities of accident. The polyphony of language, in fact, both performs and archivally contains its history of productive indirection. Within what an algorithm might call a flaw subsists what the poet recognizes as a chance for productive ambiguity.

To reconsider the “nowness” as opposed to the identity (or dis-identity) of poetic voice in *Sandover* is to simultaneously recast the problem of poetic form as problem of poetic *forming*: emphasis on the present *continuous* (and *discontinuous*). Blasing has noted how the formal virtuosity of Merrill’s writing paradoxically frees it from certain gravities of literary authorship so that, within Merrill’s work, his use of conventional poetic forms “work[s] implicitly to efface the speaking subject, dispersing it in the drift of impersonal time and history.” Poetic meter and other recursive patterning thus become “timing devices that are also always more than mere schemes, because they remember a past and carry with them the burden of a public history” (109). Blasing’s explicit attempt here is to offer the case of Merrill as a complicating figure for trends in literary periodization and literary innovation that would claim clear, verifiable laws for poetic history and poetic “progress.” Beyond the question of literary history, we must also keep in mind the performing, *active temporality* inherent in poetry as a generic practice—an active

time that links history to the “nowness” of its own taking-place. That poetry itself is a “timing device” is an idea that I will carry forward, to consider the question of “poetic form” in a way that seeks to dislodge it from misleading associations with plastic or material concepts.

If poetic form is to be thought as a form of time, this thinking will bring us to question seemingly at cross-purposes: time as history and time as duration. Conventional poetic form, for example, confronts us with both aspects of these questions, as these verse forms present us with reifications of socially significant repetitions (e.g., fourteen lines becomes “sonnet”). To think about this question in relation to the highly formalized and widely varying forms of prosody in *Sandover*, it will be important not to lose sight of the temporal thematic with which the poem is also concerned: the apocalyptic, and the preventative. To say that the temporal character of *Sandover*’s spirit conversation is one of “deferral” is true, but still not sufficiently precise. This epic is immersed in the idea of a deferral intensified to the point of offering an actual “forestalling” of apocalyptic imminence. This alternate mode of temporal deferral appears in sharp contrast to the soteriological epic on which it is based—Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*.

The “time signature” of a comedy, like that of the tragedy, is not only that time moves “forward” but also that it moves “upward” to a happy resolution. While it is patterned on the *Divine Comedy* and performs an anabasis toward a spiritual dispensation, the profound gnosticism of the poem’s relation to the cosmos cannot leave its reader with any hope of joyous union, as in Dante’s final circle of the *Paradiso*. Why has Merrill patterned a poem concerned with apocalypse on a redemptive, comedic model, only to undercut the telos and leave the reader with an experience of a protracted conversation rather than a conversion? If the history of harm written in the last three centuries were to offer one term only by and through which it has continually and reliably justified its means-end logic, that term would be “progress.” Merrill, I

contend, is uniquely aware of the intimate link between cultural, historical notions of “progress” and the proliferation of commodities, weapons, and technology (none of which are mutually exclusive products). To call into question the state of the world without calling into question this unceasingly valorized term of “progress” and its attendant powers of rationalization, Merrill understands, can only hope to fail. Merrill discovers, in fact, a way to call progress into question not only through the content of his epic poem, but also through the procedural *form* of his poem. That the form of this poem has made it difficult to classify within literary is exactly the result of this formal intervention.

Blasing similarly expresses frustration with not only the academic tendency to look for linear lines of progress or organic development within literary history, but also with poetic forms of “revolution” that claim to offer newer, better, ever-more radical modes of poetry that throw off the shackles of the “old” by means of reinventing form. Merrill’s formalism, she argues, presents not a renegade or reactionary stance at the moment of Language poetry’s ascendancy and Confessionalism’s continuing dominant position in the poetic landscape. Here, Merrill’s protean formalism is shown to be opposed to the cult of “originality.” She shows that poetic innovation for the sake of ushering in new world orders struck Merrill as “outmoded,” and she argues that Merrill refuses to fall prey to triumphant dialectics of the politics of form. Blasing’s argument reveals a crucial strand of thought in Merrill’s poetic production, namely, that progress itself is outmoded. While progress is clearly neither militarily, economically, or socially outmoded (yet), Merrill might agree, that progress as an organizing value for civilization has become *ethically outmoded*.

“If originality and novelty are outmoded concepts for Merrill,” Blasing adds, “so is the expectation of a correlation between convention and authority” (110). In other words, what may

be most postmodern about Merrill is that his use of form presumes no natural, essential, or even social link between form and cultural relevance. “Such formalism” as Merrill practices, Blasing argues, both “questions the historical and metaphysical authority of conventions as much as it challenges free forms that appeal to ‘experience’ ...for their legitimation and authority” (102). The logic of this critique (here of confessional and neo confessional modes) can be extended to clarify the epic-spiritual dimension of this poem, which seems to situate itself within a tradition of oracular poetics, and yet, as critics unanimously agree, undercuts the possibility of this oracular mode ever being legitimated or authorized. Merrill claims that he has had a spiritual “experience,” but in contrast to a Dantean or Miltonian form of uncomplicated imperative to impress the universalizing truth of this experience on the reader, Merrill is rather at opposite pains, to invoke the oracular without provoking the spectacular. The much discussed ironic mode of this poem’s approach to its subject matter is key to this resistance Merrill demonstrates to universalizing his “revelation” as anything other than a personal experience. The self-deprecating narrative voice common to much meditative nature-writing is present everywhere in *Sandover*, which I mention not to nominate it for inclusion in a different genre so much as to point out the ecological consciousness of experience that it shares with nature-writing: a mode of address where the “universal” (read: shared environment) is considered as the relevant context, but where the conclusions and hypotheses drawn are provisional and partial. The provisional and partial is not tantamount to the “singular” voice of original power and authority (in which, to follow the analogy, the genre of the travel-adventure writer is more relevant). Merrill breaks free of that system of the poetic creation of authority through the linkage of the voice of the chosen-singular to the audience of the benighted-universal that spans from Dante through Blake, to Pound’s *Cantos*; whether or not he entirely succeeds remains a question for each reader, but it is clear that

his primary effort is to avoid the trap of the singular/universal in pursuit of a different apocalyptic conversation: the ecological dyad of the partial and the shared.

Merrill's epic critiques of existing modes of generating (social) authority through poetry. Adopting poetry's most ancient form of buttonholing—the doomsday epic—Merrill abdicates not only his uncontested claim to *authorship* (who writes this poem?) but also his claim to *authority*, something that Dante or Milton, despite their fawning thanks to their respective Muses of inspiration, nevertheless are loath to relinquish.

I want to read Merrill's "anachronism" of form in particular, because of the potential such a reading has to elucidate Merrill's critique of progress for progress's sake. The interesting puzzle here is to attend to how Merrill's use of form not only transmits a past out of place, out of context: anachronistically. To read poetry metaformally means to attend to the relation *between* forms as opposed to forms as singular units of meaning: to read form syntactically. To do so can clarify the variety of outcomes different forms create; we must attend to their combinations, not just their insular occurrences. As Blasing notes, poetic chronologies based on form are untidy affairs that "break down into a network of anachronisms: retrievals and re-appropriations —of given forms for different functions" (103). Through metaformal analytics for the reading of form, we can move beyond the periodizing and taxonomizing of poetic form to a broader horizon of syntactical relation between forms. Merrill's nonlinear, prophetic history relies in part on his experiments with an anachronistic grammar of forms. Returning to the conception of the poem as a "timing device," we can read this alongside form's function as coextensive with a "network of anachronisms." The poetic timing device creates an arrest within duration, similar to what Sedgwick has diagnosed as the "temporalizing" function of the Ephraim voice. She calls his role that of a "typographic differential, shared with the poem's other ghosts, more indeterminate than



inclusion between quotation marks: both less conventional in import and more permeable to the contagion of surrounding tones and grammars” (460). For Sedgwick, the textual apparatus of *Sandover* consists in “a highly charged interface between currents that differ not in their elements but in their spacing. Writing and silence are, as we shall see, in a similarly energetic proximity, and blockage or resistance to writing is the charged interface...repetition is the wrong name for the resistance” (478). The poetic timing device creates parallel temporalities, a network of anachronisms, a resistant suspension of pure duration through complexity of recursion and permutation. This “network of anachronisms” implicates poetry as uniquely adapted to exploring those paradoxes that subtend historical sequence: the deferrals, prolepses, dead futures, and undead pasts that mold within consensus reality’s uniform chain linking origin and progress. Blasing urges us to think literary change beyond its representation “as an evolutionary or revolutionary process”; forms, which never become “permanently obsolete,” instead, even furthermore, offer tools to continually deliver the power—and the threat—of obsolescence into what is called the present (103). Merrill transmits a contrary past, a past fundamentally out of place, out of context, and his critique of linear history is inextricably tied to his critique of progress. Merrill’s experiments in the outmoded seek an impure grammar of forms rather than the reproduction of forms: an apparatus, not a machine. What happens, then, to the work of poetic form when change and continuity are under re-consideration in an age bracketed by a technologically-driven (read: *nontranscendent*) apocalypse?

This brings us to the *technē* of poetic form: and to the place where nuclear technology hyperbolically recasts *technē* as such, revealing (“apocalyptically”) that the successful making or *poiēsis* of technology, while it pretends to pure intentionality, foresight, or mastery, is irreconcilably predicated on the accidental, the uncertain, the unforeseen, and even the arbitrary.

Not only does technology *originate* from these conditions, its creation further precipitates these conditions within the world. To be “bracketed,” historically, by the nuclear age—with Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the beginning and nuclear winter as prophesied telos—is to live in the age of the technological *epoché*. In this age, a cultural critique of progress must arise almost inevitably out of these conditions of suspense. The increasing devotion of the work-of-making (*technē*) towards the devising of the preassembled apparatus of making (technology) constrains the technology to pre-set, predictable forms and undeviating pathways which are incapable of adapting to the arbitrary, the contingent, or the unprecedented. The more that technology takes over the sphere of *technē*, the greater grows the alienation of those who live within this made environment from that which is unforeseeable.

The technological age could be said to be the age in which form produces content, instead of content producing form. To reconnect this to the question of poetry, it may seem now less than accidental that the era of Cold War poetry was dominated by two mutually antagonistic camps: confessional poetics (including politically radical versions of this mode) in which content produces form (usually free verse)—and Language poetry (including *avant garde* modalities such as concrete poetry and procedural poetry) in which form produces content (or deconstructs content beyond any recognizable parameters of meaning). Framed by their nuclear *epoché*, the two poetic camps appear as humanism versus technologism: they present both a *homo faber* who speaks and a *homo faber* who is-being-spoken, two models locked into a bitter mistrust of each other. Most critics have located Merrill within the form-produces-content camp, albeit from the perspective of attention to his neoformalism.<sup>114</sup> I wonder, however, if Merrill’s *Sandover* might

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<sup>114</sup> Many reviews of Merrill’s early work fault him for his formal talents, especially as this early work coincided with the heyday of confessional poetry, oracular free verse, etc. The general theme to these negative reviews is that his poetry is all “style” or form, and no “substance,” or Wordsworthian emotional philosophy. Humphries writes, “Usually, critics and readers think it the responsibility of form to emblemize content--the former always subordinate

not represent a third term in this antagonistic polarization of the cultural scene of poetry. The relation between form and content is extraordinarily complex in the *Sandover* epic, as already seen through the 10,000 pages of “original” content being burned, the formal-prosodic “networks of anachronism” and so on. In the making of *Sandover*, it would seem that content emerges as a deterritorialization of form—it demands and yet resists a form, it pursues form, it vanishes beneath form, it highlights its own continual excess *to* the form—and that form persists as a sympathetic compromise between spirit interlocutors, the shape of organic life in the universe, impending doom, the English language, and a teacup held in part by a second person.

### Translating the Anhuman

The unequalled virtuosity of Merrill’s formalism is second only to his skill at paranomasia. Critics have worried that “such virtuosity ...has attained a being so purely, proteanly, pluralistically formal that it disappears as characterization, as someone's voice.” (Humphries, 188). Such pronouncements help us to understand that, between the important flaws of homophony and the *skilled formalization* of the voice in prosody, this partially effaces or complicates language’s being able to appear *as* voice. Bereft of the fiction of voice, instead language appears as apparatus. A voice that is no longer “someone’s” voice is no longer a possession, and perhaps ripe to “possess”—as a disembodied voice. Form undoes the bodied-apparition of language. Perhaps it is this same intuition which has led so many critics to insist that the many selves of *Sandover* can only lead us to believe that the mysteries illuminated in the trilogy are of human, not superhuman provenance (Keller, 137). Which is to say: the formalization of voice raises the *question* of whether or not this voice *is* human, only to

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to the latter. Merrill has reversed that ratio. His content, his concrete imagery, ... is forced into the subaltern role of a metaphorical refrain to the formal structure, a commentary and an explication of it” (186).

immediately foreclose itself as anything but a figural question. Multiple, ambiguous, fluid, the particular mechanisms of voice which formalization reveals can deliver a language *at the periphery of voice*. Not all formal prosody begs the question of “whether or not this voice is human,” yet perhaps every instance does *risk* it. The disembodiment commonly ascribed to textuality, which routinely fractures any claim to self-presence, is an aspect that is heightened, intensified, and re-alienated by the introduction of those language techniques commonly known as “poetic form.” It is a curious phenomenon indeed, and one which *Sandover*, in its unrelentingly varied and almost superhumanly skilled prosody, brings to the foreground. Within the framing suspensions and questions of the apparatus, Merrill’s use of form is able simultaneously to problematize not only the lyric subject whose expression “reaches an accord with language itself” (Adorno, 43), but also the species-exceptionalism of this lyric Voice. I propose that the language of *Sandover* evokes not quite the human nor, despite its pretense, the superhuman, but rather the “anhuman.” The “anhuman” is not the “inhuman,” nor is it simply the “nonhuman” (which generally refers to objects or animals as distinguished *from* the human). The “anhuman,” as I intend to employ this term, is something subtends the human, rather than departing from it. The anhuman is the apparatus of the human, of the human’s own creaturely life: that upon which all that has come to be understood as “the human” has been predicated. This predication contains acutely the condition of its suppression, its refusal to be recognized.

This “anhuman” offers an alternative to other hierarchical binaries and schemas which operate in relation to the human through modes of abjection, repression, hegemony, the dialectic, or sublimation (i.e. “inhuman,” “superhuman”). The “anhuman” is simply the undisclosed *in which and of which humanity partakes* untotally. Technology, for example, is anhuman. Language is also anhuman. Which is to say, language is not a capacity solely belonging to

humans, and yet, it is also ours; at the same time, it has not yet been “recognized” as being the capacity of other species of life, hence its continual trotting out at one so-called defining trait of our species. The anhumanity of language is, I would argue, one of the main focuses and modes of inquiry in *Sandover*. This foregrounding of the anhumanity of language is what troubles the perennially unstable question of poetic voice in a remarkable way.<sup>115</sup>

That this is an anxious question can be seen in critical ambivalence about the authorship of this poem: can we take this poem to be legitimately authored by spirits from another world? If not by them, then by the equal partnership with David Jackson? The burning of the transcripts can be cited as the impasse of this question, since we cannot track differences between the “original” version of the spirits and the “final” version of Merrill’s. The question of spiritual authorship, however, remains an impasse for critical poetic scholarship. Despite Merrill’s insistence that, regarding the cosmic statements of *Sandover*, “it’s not me saying those things, but by and large it’s Mirabell, who isn’t a human character,” Materer, who cites this statement (made in an interview with C.A. Buckley) in his book-length study, *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*, adds that he finds this assertion “unconvincing” (98).<sup>116</sup> While critics tend to lionize the techniques of *Sandover* as pluralizing and de-stabilizing the subject, there is an anxious, counterbalancing movement of recuperation that tends to follow such declarations to minimize their otherwise literal force; to this end, the de-stabilized subject can strangely reemerge as a dialectically synthesized subject:

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<sup>115</sup> Materer has noted in his criticism of *Sandover* the troubling issue “of whether the subject matter of the poem is merely a compulsive or neurotic personal experience,” something which he fears would make the poem “devoid of the universal qualities necessary to a work of art,” and he claims that Merrill himself also fears this may be true of the work. However, the presentation of the anhumanity of language, of that which always haunts the humanity of voice, resolves this anxious question by indicating the precise point of convergence between the “compulsively personal” and the “universal.”

<sup>116</sup> The interview with Buckley can be found in “Exploring *The Changing Light at Sandover*” in *Twentieth Century Literature* 38 (Winter 1992): 415-35 (see p.423).

David Kalstone reads Ephraim as an emblematic dialectical process typical of the long or epic poem through which Merrill seeks to resolve and absorb the instability of the self (125-44). Eve Sedgwick calls Ephraim “the voice a poet wants because he is not a voice,” a ghostly function of lyric deixis: “he hasn’t the presence even of an inscription. He is ... pure pointing in the absence of either a pointing subject (the cup stands in) or a pointed-at object (the alphabet stands in). He leaves the surface unmarked.” (459) But if, as Kalstone argues, the “instability” of the self has been “resolved and absorbed” through the writing of the poem, then this new “stability” of self could only be the stability of the well-wrought graft—a concept of selfhood *as* a procedure of language. This putative self, reliant upon and indebted to language, disclose its essential anhumanity.

If we apply our comprehension of the “task of the poetic translator” to the work of Merrill in composing this epic, certain things become clearer. Merrill’s much noted “irony” changes from a mocking dilettantism in the face of revelation (as some have read it) and becomes a self-deprecating mode of commentary commonly found in a “translator’s preface.” Rather than pursuing the origination of content through form, Merrill appears as the somewhat beleaguered translator who is compelled not to originate but to render intelligible, within a language’s forms (among which are numbered poetic forms) that which he can only despair of ever rendering *accurate*. Any notion of the indexical or the verifiable, which a poetry of confessional experience might present, is transformed from a quantum of “experience” into an unrecognizable, and ultimately unverifiable state through translation’s process.

This approach can bring a new significance to observations about the fluidity of *Sandover*’s poetic vocal apparatus. Keller, who has noted the “expanded perception of the self” offered by *Sandover*’s construction, also concludes that “[d]espite all the epic’s lessons in

hierarchy, its energizing principles turn out to be continuity, flux, and synthesis—continuity between anima and animal, between dead and living, real and imaginary, self and other” (141-42). “Between dead and living” is clearly temporalizable—but then again, how “clearly” marked is this time? The unstable “nowness” of this poetic voice—this vocal apparatus—belongs first and foremost to its poetics of conversation, yet also to a process of translation: a making intelligible of the machine of the mind, the algorithmic dimension of language.

For Merrill, language constitutes “premises” rather than promises. His linguistic model of cognition seems inspired by the mode of hypothesis rather than axiom and derivation. This linguistic hypothesis has all the provisionality of inductive reasoning and, like induction, its strength lies in its knowledge of its incompleteness. Yet its formal structure operates in the style of the deductive: that is, it is generated by the radical non-guarantee of the logical operator “if...”. Returning to the question of apocalypse as a “starting point,” I would argue that Merrill’s poetry is concerned with illuminating not the *end* of all life, but the *if* in *life*. His historical viewpoint, a history of the future, relies on the “if... then...” of hypothetical deduction rather than the “this... then...” of historical linearity. Moreover, the transpersonal voice of *Sandover*, inspired by a variety of poetic and epic traditions that de-centralize the speaking subject, literalizes the radical *if* of personhood itself.

As Humphries explains with respect to the Ouija voices, “Mirabell advises that it is pointless to try to ‘locate’ these spirits, think of them as constituted ‘selves,’ wonder ‘where’ they are, whether ‘real’ and how. They are as real as we are, constituted by loss. If we ‘see’ ourselves and not them it is because we are ‘LIFE-INFECTED’” (191). Here Humphries, quoting a phrase from the trilogy’s third book, alludes to one of the key modes of reversibility created in *Sandover*: death and life exchange hierarchies, dissolve their binary structure. Rather

than life and afterlife, world and underworld, we are presented with an infra-worlding that involutes the spectral dead with those carnal beings “infected” with life. Life is the wager, the risk, the “if” that the dead souls enter into with all the poignancy of Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Only these spirits from *jenseits* (beyond) give a whole new meaning to “death drive”. Merrill’s *Sandover* resonates with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, thematizing the driving power of the dead, as well as employing poetry’s modes of recursive structuration to perform the radical anachronism which is its historiographical hypothesis. In *Scripts for the Pageant*, David Jackson comments that he has begun to feel like he and Merrill are the dead ones, languishing in the afterlife, while the lively banter of the spirit world transmits to them. Here, the unstable perspective that is the “if” in life creates a reversibility capable of altering perspectives indirectly and perhaps irrevocably.

*Sandover* proposes that language’s “reasoned indirection” is its anachronistic resistance to nuclear nihilism. The precariousness of language is highlighted in a passage near the end of the epic, when “Nature” appears in a masque and at the end declares that she says “YES” to humanity. Her words: “A LAST RESOUNDING YES” which sounds positive in the moment, but Merrill, the next day, is already worrying about the hidden negativity or finality of the word “last.” Is this *last* affirmation to be decisive? Merrill asks, is this “because Man won’t be hearing Yes much more?” The reply, concerning the actions of Nature, says, “SHE SETS MEANING SPINNING LIKE A COIN,” raising the specter of the aleatory within the very field of signification, in what seems like a coin toss for the human soul (492). But the final conclusion is that humanity will have to say “yes” from now on to its own continuation. Rather than nature, it is humanity that must do the judging. As Michael reassuringly concludes in the Coda, “YOU ARE NOT ALONE WITH YOUR RADIO.” Instead, in a tradition stretching from Dante to the



present, Merrill, DJ, and the reader, too, are “PART OF A WHOLE CRYSTAL SET” (555).

This radio, moved by forces that come from immeasurable distances, finds its listening, its thinking, its utterance, and its creativity inextricable from its own apparatus.

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